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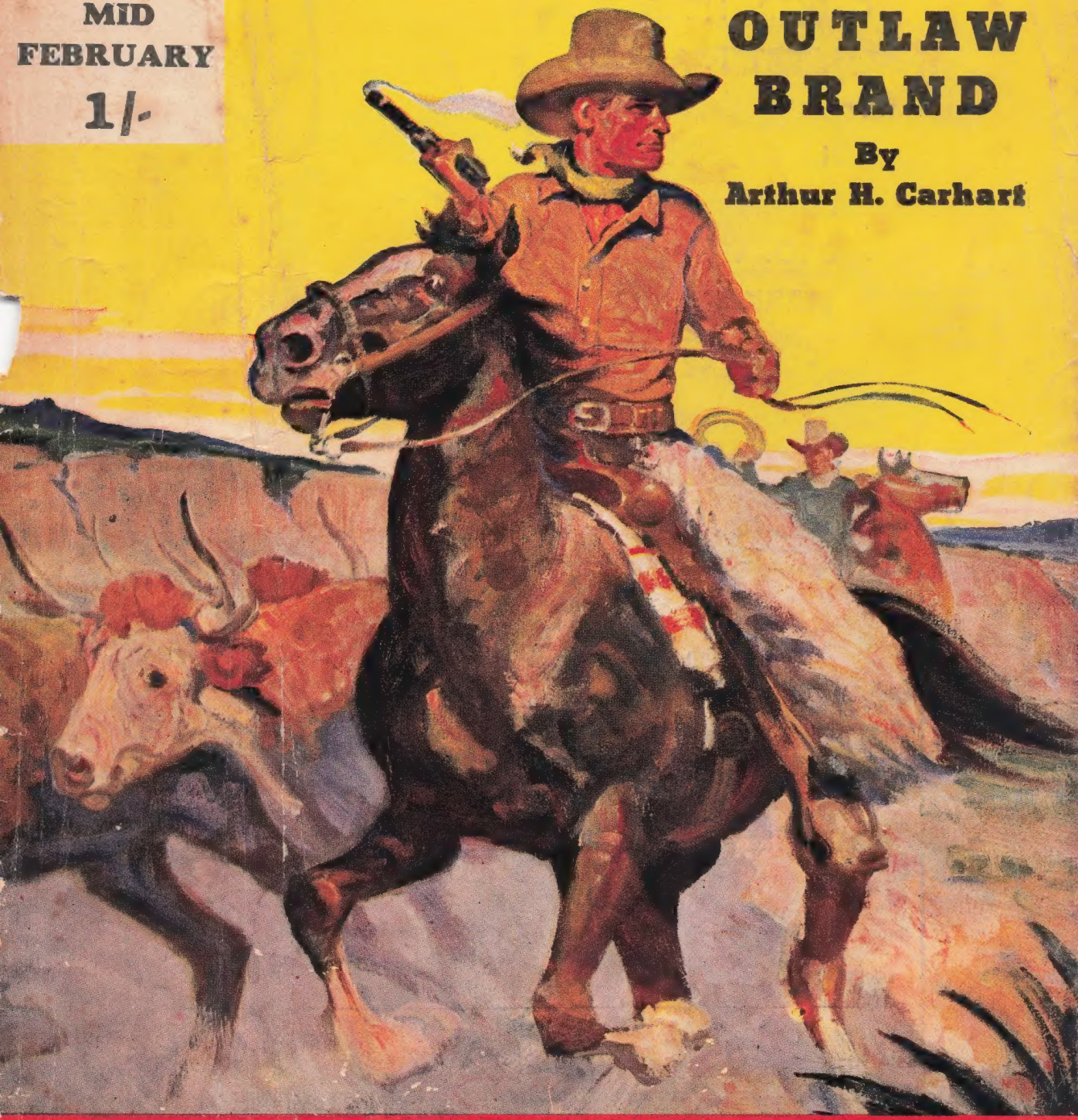

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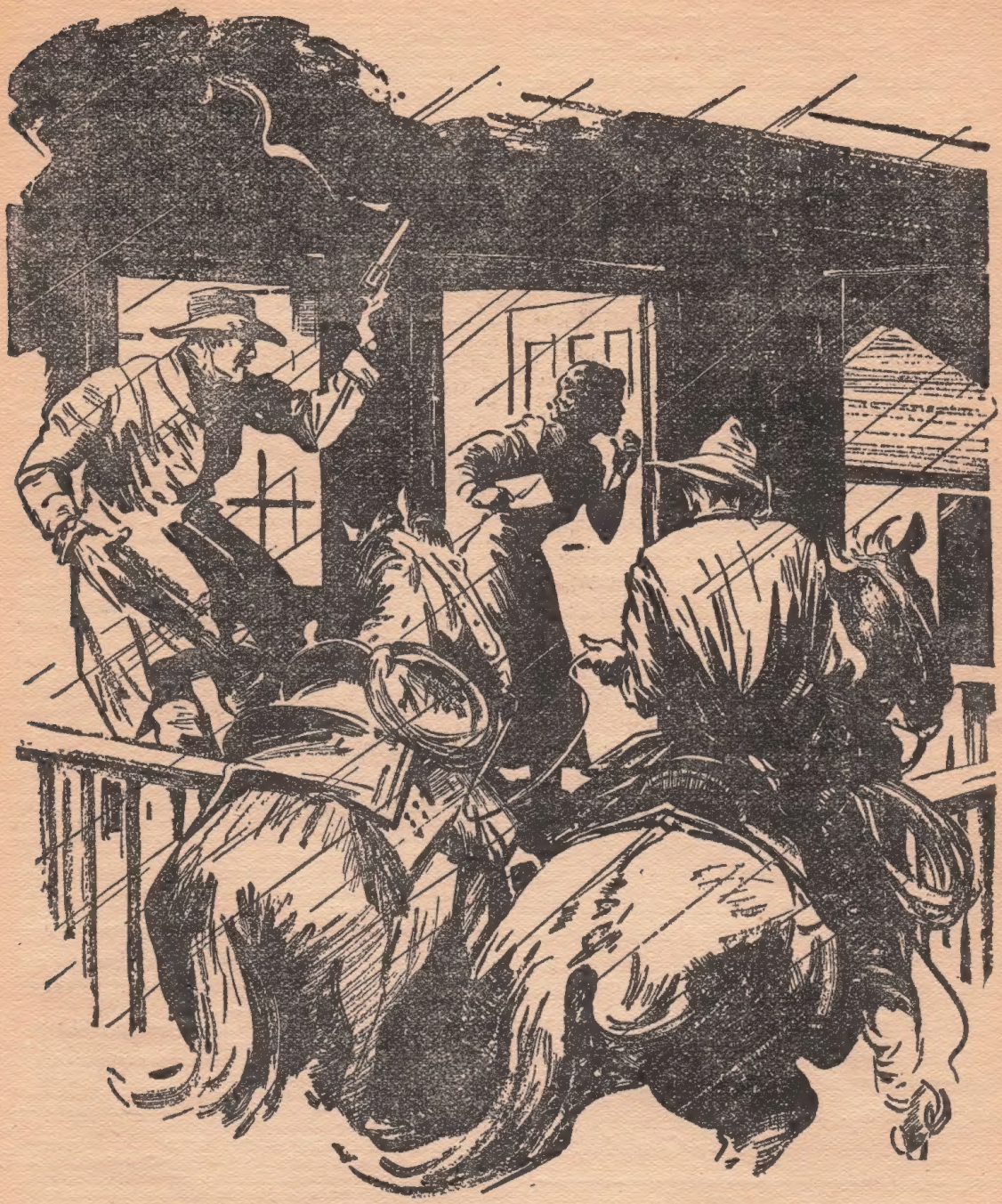

A War-Pot Of Trouble Was Brewing In Little Wolf Hills, That Hidden Outlaw Sanctuary Where Old Deke Catlin Was King, And Into That Red Maw Of Hell Rode Clay Vincent And The Conejos Kid. Old Deke Welcomed All Renegades, But Little Did He Know That This Pair Of Wanted Hombres Was To Sing His Death Song And End The Lawlessness Which Threatened The Honest Men Of Calcite Range

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Author of "A STREAK OF POWDER," *etc.*

CHAPTER I
Night Ride

Two horsemen who had ridden muddy trails through the rain-lashed night halted in the shadows beside the Diamond Y corrals and dismounted. They bowed their heads against the shotty rain which drummed against their slickers and broad hat brims, and flexed chilled muscles, as they watched the lighted rectangle of an unshaded window. Someone within the ranch house occasionally moved before the path of light.

"They're home," said the taller man.

"I was hopin' they might not be," growled his stocky companion who stood with stout legs well braced. "It's a foolish move for you to go in there, Clay."

"I'll leave this gate open," said Clay Vincent, the taller rider. "If something rips loose, you come on the charge and we'll fan out the other side of the yard. I know the ground around here."

"But," remonstrated the other, "some yap who's read those handbills may recognize you in the dark, and start shooting. They'll stop you before we reach Deke Catlin's protection."

"We figured there might be something like that," said Clay grimly, "and we decided to risk it. I'm going to talk to Lou Russell."

"You're just stickin' your head out to get it knocked off your shoulders."

"Don't forget, you're The Conejos Kid, a bad hombre with a reputation that's curly and full of cockleburs. When you talk like this you sound like a coyote. Not like a wolf."

"I don't have to with you," countered The Conejos Kid. "Clay, do you have to see that girl?"

"I'm seeing Lou Russell," replied Clay Vincent firmly. "We might get trapped and I've got to talk to her before that happens."

"Well," drawled The Conejos Kid, "I'm just a stranger around here. Go on if you're so dead set on it, and I'll charge in if hell pops loose."

"I'll remember that," said Clay. "If I hadn't been certain of you, I'd have left you where you was."

The Conejos Kid's mumbled reply made Clay chuckle grimly as he opened the pole gate and started across the muddy yard. He knew his partner; sawed-off, shocky-headed, red-faced and full of vinegar; a man to ride with when trails were dangerous and gunsmoke lay ahead.

Clay tiptoed across the porch and peered cautiously in at the window. Beside the table stood Porter Russell, a thick man, with a close-set head. He was dressed as he thought a rancher should dress, in flannel shirt, whipcord riding breeches and cavalry boots. He even wore a tie and his belt was bright with conchas of Navajo silver.

On the far side of the table, was Mrs. Russell. Once beautiful, the lamplight now etched lines in her face and neck which betrayed her years. She glanced uncertainly from her husband, to her daughter, Louise, who stood defiantly, chin up, at the end of the table.

Clay Vincent's gaze lingered on Louise. Dark, with black hair waving close to her small, well-shaped head, her dusky eyes snapping angrily, she made a picture. She was no blood kin of Port Russell. Her own father had died when she was less than a year old, her mother had married Russell, owner of a cross-roads store, and Lou had accepted the foster father's name.

The two had always clashed and when Louise had inherited the Diamond Y from old Pat Yale, her grandfather, the feeling had become more intense. Port Russell had sold his store, paid off his mortgage, and had shouldered in as manager of the Diamond Y.

There had been hot talk between Lou and Russell before Clay Vincent had been ousted as foreman and high-powered off the place. Tonight they were arguing about it again if Clay could judge by the way Lou's eyes flashed and she shook her dark curls.

With a shrug, Clay opened the door softly and entered. The three at the table whirled, taut with surprise.

"Well, speak of the devil," burst out Port Russell.

"And he steps through the door," Clay Vincent smiled thinly.

"I told you not to come back here," snapped Russell.

"And I told him he could," the girl cried defiantly.

"There seems to be some argument over me," drawled Clay.

"Well," cut in Russell. "She says I oughtn't to have fired you after we found you driving some of our stock with the brands worked—"

"That was a mistake, mister," said Clay quietly. "I could name the one who talked you into believing I was high grading the herd; Clint Parch, your sanctimonious neighbor made you believe that."

"Don't you say anything against Parch," shouted Russell.

"You and Parch put the outlaw brand on me," said Clay. "After I'd lived all my life on the Diamond Y."

"I've always stuck up for you, Clay," said Lou quickly. "I always have. But this!"

She picked up the handbill that had been lying on the table. Clay knew well enough what was printed on that sheet of heavy paper. It had been posted along the trail as he and The Conejos Kid had dodged and twisted to get through to where they might find refuge with Deke Catlin's crowd.

Clay looked at Lou, saw the hurt and confusion in her eyes. He turned to Porter Russell.

"Brand a man an outlaw," he said coldly, "and you don't know how far you're going to drive him along the renegade trail."

"There's the proof on that handbill," said Russell. "Says you're suspected of killing a fellow named Alve Dissmore, state livestock inspector, somewhere in the mountains of Cucharas county, and disposing of his body. You've just got it in you, that's all. Once me and Clint Parch show you up on your home range, you go to another and do something a sight worse."

For a moment Clay Vincent was too angry to answer. Then he turned to Louise.

"Lou," he said gently, "step out on the porch with me a minute. I've got something important to say to you alone!"

"Don't you go," shouted Russell. "He's going to kidnap you, so if any posse catches up with him, they'll be afraid to cut loose."

"Maybe I'd go, if he asked, if that would keep some of these Calcite hotheads from breaking out their guns," said Louise defiantly, as she walked through the door.

Clay Vincent felt his pulse beat higher as he regarded the girl before him. Slim, well formed, dressed in tailored riding clothes, Lou Russell had that about her which lit fire in a man.

"Look, Clay," said Lou sharply, "Port Russell is leaving the room. He's going after the men in the bunkhouse. Stop him!"

"Stay right where you are, Russell," ordered Clay through the open door, as he pulled his gunbelt from under his open slicker. "You know what they say I did to this state livestock inspector, Dissmore?"

"You wouldn't dare—" began Russell shakily.

"Don't dare me," grinned Clay, as he saw Port Russell's shaking knees.

"Clay," began Lou rapidly, putting her slim, brown hands on his arm. "Clay, you've no time to waste. There's a posse on the way—"

"Posse coming here?"

"Yes," she whispered. "One of Clint Parch's men was on the other side of the range today, and saw you riding this way. He telegraphed ahead. Parch went to town to get the deputy sheriff. A man rode by here twenty minutes ago, on to the Parch ranch to get his riders. Port Russell has ordered our riders to join them here."

"I guess those handbills did pretty much a job," remarked Clay with grim humor.

"Clay, you've got to run," whispered Lou.

"You don't want them to catch up with me?" he asked.

"No," she replied huskily. "No, I don't care what you did. . ."

"That was something I wanted to know; how much you trusted me," he said quietly.

"I do trust you," she said. "I can't believe you killed—"

"I didn't," he said shortly. "I had to tell you."

"Then why don't you face—"

"Lou," he cut in savagely. "I'm taking big risks to clear this whole business; but maybe I wouldn't, if you hadn't cared."

"Listen!" commanded Lou. "They're coming, Clay—"

He turned. Inside he heard a door slam, as Port Russell bolted from the room.

Mrs. Russell screamed, and a horse whinnied out in the storm.

"Here," said Clay, taking both of Lou's hands. "Take this sealed envelope. Keep it with you every hour, day and night. If I get word to you to open it, do so immediately. Don't let anything delay you. You'll find what to do from the instructions there."

A yell came from the direction of the bunkhouse, and someone shouted over where the posse was hidden in the night.

For a moment, Clay held Lou Russell close, and then he sprang aside, shouted, and his gun flared a signal into the thick night.

Mrs. Russell was calling her daughter inside the building before war rushed through the storm. War was riding now, on the run, from out in the meadows that lay toward the town of Calcite.

From the wet shadows beside the corrals, came two horses on the charge, one carrying The Conejos Kid. They slewed to a stop, and the Kid bawled into the night.

"Remember if I send word, open that envelope," whispered Clay, to the girl as he leaped clear of the porch. He caught up bridle reins and flung on, and then he and The Conejos Kid were riding shoulder and shoulder through the narrow, open gate.

Back of them all was confusion. Calcite riders and the men of the Diamond Y were milling, frantically trying to get strung out. Port Russell was yelling one set of commands, a heavy bellow belonging to Clint Parch, gave contradictory orders, and a third voice, which Clay recognized, as that of a deputy sheriff, was yelping in the middle of the mêlée. They finally came unkinked and headed into pursuit, horses running.

"One second," rasped Clay, and he dropped to the ground, lariat in hand. With a quick loop, he threw the rope around the gate posts, putting a line across, a foot above the ground.

They spurred into a meadow on a high run. Clay headed both horses, silently, and then they doubled back.

"Listen!" Clay said. "They've hit it."

At the gate, the pursuers were in a fine tangle, horses squealing, men cursing, and a gun going off in the midst of it. The leaders had stacked up on the rope, and in the dark, the whole band of horsemen were floundering hopelessly about.

"This way, now," Clay said to The Conejos Kid and they slanted off.

"Hey, Parch, you take half a dozen men and ride to block the trail up Rough Creek Canyon," the sheriff was shouting at the gate. "Parch, you get goin'!"

"Any other way to Deke Catlin's beside Rough Creek Canyon?" asked The Conejos Kid.

"None," replied Clay, "unless we want to ride risky and roundabout. We're in for a race."

The soggy meadows muffled the sound of their horses running. They skirted a pole-fence, dropped poles and passed through. Off to one side, they still heard the sounds of pursuit.

At the mouth of the narrow canyon cut by Rough Creek, they found water rushing down; the rain flood pouring from the hills. They breasted the first narrow spot, and stopped in a shelf pocket around a little angle of rock. The horses were blowing. The sound of the pursuing party halting not fifty yards downstream, came above the soft roar of waters.

"We're ahead of them," shouted Parch in his carrying bellow. "We've got 'em stopped."

"Just by the sound of his voice, I don't like the looks of that hombre," remarked The Conejos Kid.

They started upstream, keeping in the edge of the flood where it filled the chasm

floor. Where the canyon widened into a little park, they stopped.

"Well, we got out of that jam," drawled Conejos.

"That one," agreed Clay soberly. "But about the toughest play in the game is just ahead."

"When we meet Deke Catlin?" ventured Conejos.

"Just that," agreed Clay. "It's a plain gamble with our lives at stake. I told you that."

"I feel lucky," said Conejos. "Let's go on and face the old piute."

CHAPTER II
Grudge Fight

In the watery light of stormy dawn, they rode into the Catlin place. Clay reined in, facing the long, log-pillared porch of the squat, iron-roofed house.

"There's a high-powered rifle peekin' at us out of the granary yonder," said Conejos in a low voice.

"Always is," said Clay steadily. "Until Deke knows what brand of visitor he has. Hey, Deke!"

The door opened and a hatless gangling man, in ragged bibless overalls and a faded shirt came out. He was bald except for a fringe of rusty hair that hooked over in front of his ears forming generous sideburns. A bullet had once creased his scalp, leaving a scar-pattern which resembled a purple lichen. His thin nose hooked and he had a long predatory chin.

For several seconds he calmly regarded the pair sitting their mud-spattered horses. Then Deke grunted.

"Light and say yore piece," he ordered.

Clay swung down.

"You've rode a way," remarked Deke.

"And fast," replied Clay. "Maybe you wonder why we showed up at this particular place."

Deke smacked his thin lips and hauled a crumpled handbill out of his pocket.

"Seems fellows with their faces on one of these is liable to show up here," he remarked. "Rather expected you."

The door opened, and a scowling rider came slouching out. Clay recognized Ike Liddle, a quarrelsome, rock-fisted brawling gent, who had ridden one season for Parch.

When crossed, Ike Liddle was headstrong and warlike.

"I won't stand for Clay Vincent herdin' with this bunch," Liddle burst out.

"You been sayin' that since I remarked he might be ridin' this way an' find welcome," stated Deke mildly.

"He called me a cow thief once," snarled Liddle. "I ain't never had satisfaction fer him slurrin' me that-a-way. Told you, I'd beat hell out of him, then run him down the trail."

"Now that would be right handsome," countered Deke Catlin mildly. "Ought to be a pretty sight, sure enough."

"Don't hooraw me, Deke," said Liddle menacingly.

"No hooraw," said Deke. "If you two fightin' cocks are all proddy an' totin' a grudge, best you settle it right now. Won't have no such rag chewin' in my outfit."

"You mean you won't let us hole in here unless I lick Liddle?" demanded Clay.

"Somethin' like that," agreed Deke. "Ain't had a fight for a couple of days, an' this one ought to be a dinger. Important point is, Liddle says you can't stay. An' if you whip the devil out of him, I'll see you do."

"Then I'll lick Liddle."

"It's a frame-up," said The Conejos Kid aside, as Liddle began peeling off his leather jacket and old Deke Catlin stuck his head in the door, roaring for all hands to turn out for some knuckle knocking.

The riders came ambling from the house, and the grins on their sun-reddened, whisker-smudged faces gave an added evil cast to their hard-creased features. Fighting, any kind, was their meat.

"All right, you two," said Deke. "No eye-gougin'. Want no blind men who can't line rifle sights. No other fightin' tricks barred. You ready?"

"I'm all set," growled Liddle.

"This is a hell of a reception," ventured The Conejos Kid under his breath. "Damn old wolf's lickin' his lips; look at him."

"Square away, you two," ordered Deke. "Shuck yore gun, Vincent. This is bare-fisted stuff. There. You got the whole ranch yard to play in. All right, let's find out which makes the first coyote racket. What in hell's holdin' you, Ike? Have yore guts gone yellow?"

Ike Liddle swore. He started a lunge, slipped in the mud, fell, and came up with his face spattered. Someone in the group laughed. Liddle came on with a roar, fists swinging, as Clay stepped aside. Liddle slid to a stop.

"What is this?" he sneered. "A game of tag, or do you think it's a quadrille?"

With a quick twist, Clay let fly a punch. It landed and Liddle flopped flat on his hams. One of Deke's riders yelled.

"Four bits on the recruit," said one. "I got four bits he rubs Ike's nose in the dirt."

"I got five bucks says the same thing," broke out The Conejos Kid excitedly. "Five bucks. Any takers?"

"Cover that for me," bawled Liddle, standing all muddy and hot. "Someone grab that bet!"

"Cut out the shashayin'," ordered Deke Catlin.

Liddle cursed again, but this time he came on more carefully. Clay swung, and missed. A solid smash rocked his head back. He tried to brace himself, but he slipped. Liddle pounced and they rolled in the mud.

"Scrouge him, Ike!" A rider yelped like a pack wolf.

"I'll twist his—" began Liddle. Just then Clay struck, this time to the chin.

Liddle rocked backward, slipping and sliding, across the open space. Clay pounded after him. The gallery streamed off the porch and made a rough circle. Dimly Clay saw the grinning hard-faced men.

"Paste him, pilgrim," shouted the one who had bet four bits. "Paste him; I'm bettin' on yuh!"

Liddle heard and came with fists slashing. Clay gave ground, then counter attacked, but Liddle was braced. Both went down. For a moment they were on hands and knees, but Liddle didn't get up. He threw himself and caught Clay off balance. His arms wrapped, and his legs snaked to lock. Teeth sank into Clay's ear. He twisted, but was unable to free himself from Liddle's wolf-hold. He got a grip on Liddle's fingers, and bent them back. The pain made Liddle curse, and Clay jerked away from the punishing teeth.

That tooth-hold made war break loose in Clay.

"That's the spirit, pilgrim," yelped the waddie with the four-bit bet. "That's the old life!"

Clay lunged and caught Liddle off balance, threw him down. Immediately he was on top of Liddle, slugging in the rolling clinch. They staggered up, still slugging wildly and he saw Liddle's head snap. He was driving Liddle back, across the slight slope of the muddy yard, toward the round, wood-stave stock tank by the wind-

mill. Conejos yelled, and there was a shout from the other men.

With all his might, Clay slammed in. He caught Liddle about the waist, soaked up a punch in the nose as he did, but lifted his antagonist high and slammed him down in the mud. Then he jumped, and Liddle's face was being ground into the mud. Clay shoved it deeper, until he knew Liddle's mouth and nostrils were full of the messy dirt of the ranch yard. Liddle floundered, got half up, and Clay slammed in a rocking blow that snapped against the jaw. Liddle caved, floundered, had his face rammed into the mud again. He began yammering.

"Enough?" demanded Clay, and his teeth gritted on the words. "Enough, Liddle? Say you've got enough."

"Won't," mumbled Liddle.

"Give him the works, pilgrim," shouted the four-bitter. "Take him apart for coyote bait."

"Say enough," rasped Vincent, and rocked Liddle again with a smash to the head.

Liddle cursed, and struggled. With both hands knotted in his hair, Clay soused Liddle's face down in the muck; and soused him down again.

"Enough," gasped Liddle. "I've got all I want!"

"He yelled like a coyote," bellowed old Deke.

"He's got one more thing coming to him," said Clay, getting up stiffly. "He's all dirty. Needs a bath. Can't wait till Saturday night."

He hauled Liddle up, gripped around his waist, and slipping a little, walked to the tank full of water. With a heave he tossed the floundering man into the middle of the tank. Liddle sputtered curses. By now the gang was howling. It had been a darn good fight and this was a stem-winder of a finish. Ike Liddle with all his big talk and some reputation as a fighter, thrashing around like a drunken goose in the stock tank.

Clay stood, legs braced apart, while his enemy climbed clumsily out of the tank. But there was no more fight in Liddle. He glared at the grinning riders, cursed Clay steadily, then whirled on old Deke Catlin.

"You old fool," he said thinly. "I've told you how that Russell girl dotes on this rascal. I told you how she—"

"Leave her out," ordered Clay, and wished immediately he had not said it.

"The hell I will," blustered Liddle. "She figures in this. When someone says for you to go down and drift some Diamond Y beef out of the country, you'll gag on that."

"He'll do it," said old Deke thinly. "If I say for him to do that, he'll do just what he's ordered, or he'll not last long enough for anyone to collect the reward on them handbills. Now you've said enough, Ike."

"I haven't said my say," snapped Liddle. "You, an' the whole bunch of you, can go straight to. I'm goin' down to where I belong; I'm goin' to report to Clint Parch, so I am."

They watched Liddle stomp to the stable. The dozen or so riders looked uneasy. Deke turned on them.

"What in hell you hangin' around about for?" he said sharply. "Scatter."

The Conejos Kid stayed beside Deke and Clay. The old renegade eyed the Kid; took in the bull-dog jaw, the steady blue eyes, the stocky, bow-legged style of the man.

"Looks half wild cat," stated Deke. "Got any fightin' spirit? Do you trust him?"

"Trust my life with that hombre," said Clay.

Deke grunted. "That's what we've all got to do around here," he remarked. "Must say, you sorta worked Ike Liddle over. Now he's goin' down to raise hell with Parch. Well, let it come. Ike's one of Parch's spies, I think. Been tellin' me my business too much. Let him go; an' let Parch paw dirt and bellow, if he thinks it gets him anything. I've got plenty on that gentleman for him to shoot off too much."

From over Deke's scrawny shoulder, The Conejos Kid risked a wink. For a close-lipped old rascal the old man was rather blowing off. Deke turned on Clay.

"How about what I said, about you not bein' willin' to work on the Diamond Y herd?" he demanded, and his eyes became gimlets.

"I'll take orders," said Clay steadily. "If you'll let us hole in here, I'll follow whatever directions you give."

"All right," said Deke. "I'll give 'em. That'll be one of yore jobs. Guess if that handbill is right you'll be glad enough to stay on this range. Anybody who's beefed out a state livestock inspector is welcome here." Old Deke went up the steps and onto the porch. He turned and looked at the two new members of his outfit.

"Turn your horses in the corral, and come inside. Java and pancakes is waitin'," he said and stomped into the house.

CHAPTER III
On Outlaw Range

The Little Wolf hills were outlaw range. When a man wanted to hide out in this area that was shunned by honest citizens, he rode to the Little Wolf plateau and sought out Deke Catlin.

If Deke granted sanctuary, the fugitive could ride as far north as the Majestic Canyon where the plateau jerked down in wide steps; or he could ride south to the point where those uncertain, jagged little peaks of the plateau gathered themselves and climbed to form the towering Sierra Retahilas. There were ways through the Retahilas, and contraband cattle were driven out in that direction, but nobody tried to come onto the plateau from that quarter.

In this stretch of land where men could dodge the law, Deke Catlin was king. There was something about the whang and gristle of Deke that kept men from asking whence he came. But those who knew him were willing to bet on where he was going. Odds were offered that when he arrived at his final destination, the devil would be thrown out, and Deke's gang would raise the realm of Satan on at least one corner and put a block under it.

In the days that followed the fight with Ike Liddle, Clay and The Conejos Kid learned many things and became familiar with many places. There were tiny parks between the humpy little hills of the plateau where a hundred whitefaces could be stored while reworked brands were healing.

There were lookout points, and a masked trail that Deke pointed out to Clay, by which stock could be eased up cliffs from

the Calcite side, hazed into one of the hidden parks, and leisurely worked over as to brands. Afterwards they could be sifted out of the south end of the Little Wolfs, through the Retahilas, across a state line, where certain agents, of sundry and slippery cattle buyers waited at appointed hours.

This knowledge was no surprise to Clay. There was too much general suspicion of how Catlin's outfit worked to allow for surprises. But here was information that the men of Calcite had been trying to peg down for some years. They never got anything definite enough to hang old Deke or declare open season. That benchy trail explained a lot. Most Calcite people believed the only way up from that side was through Rough Creek Canyon. No trail of lost stock had ever come that way.

Riding in at noon in the latter part of the first week, Clay was met at the corrals by old Deke.

"Clint Parch has done give up searchin' for you down yonder," he said. "I was listenin' in on the telephone this forenoon. Parch must have a particular pick on you for some reason. Couldn't be that Russell girl and such, could it now?"

"It is Lou Russell," said Clay directly. There was no reason to dodge that.

Deke smacked his lips, and grinned, with that thin, edgy grimace that revealed the inner workings of his soul.

"You said," he drawled, "you'd not stop at cuttin' out a piece of the Diamond Y beef. There's a fist full of Diamond Y whitefaces in the pasture just under the rim near Trout Falls. Maybe you could ride down there before sundown, an' sorta grab that stock."

"I'll be in the little park, over beyond Crouse Creek, come sundown," stated Clay.

"You better be," said Deke, and he smacked his lips again. "In this business, personal feelin's have to be buried."

Clay Vincent did not relish this ride. At the rimrock he stopped and looked down over the flats of Calcite. Home range and the events that had passed, had made him ride it outlaw. He grinned thinly, and started down the hidden driveway; a shelf-to-shelf ledge trail, broad and easy where one grass covered balcony ramped into the next. From below this the driveway could

not be seen and where it might have been sighted out, the tall spruce masked the way.

The handful of whitefaces that Deke had said would be near the foot of the cliffs, grazed in a parky slope. Clay wondered which of the Diamond Y riders was tied into this skullduggery so that the cattle would be at a place where they could be picked up without coming in sight of the home ranch.

The grimmest thought of all came as he started hazing the cattle toward the place where they would thread back of a timber stand, in a string-long park, before starting the climb. It wasn't far from here he had been picked up driving the Diamond Y stock, six head with worked brands. Clay knew now that they had been driven to the rim, rebranded there, and had gotten away, and had come back down the rock ledge driveway. Parch had made the most of what had happened.

Clay halted, startled, as he came to the turn to the first rising ledge. He knew this was no chance happening. Lou Russell had been advised to ride out here to catch him in the act of drifting those whitefaces off the Diamond Y.

She reined in a pace from him. He wondered if his face was as bloodless and drawn as hers. For a moment neither spoke.

"Well," she said thinly, and her lip curled, "I was told I'd catch you at it."

"Who told you?" he demanded.

"That's my business," she retorted, and the fury of her scorn crept into her voice.

He bowed his head as she stormed on. When he finally looked at her there was such hurt in his eyes that she stopped as though he had struck her.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" she demanded, and her voice was trembling.

"Nothing . . . now," he said slowly. "I suppose you'll spread the glad tidings soon as you get back to the ranch."

She laughed, but it was choked by a dry sob.

"I've got more pride than that," she flung at him.

"You couldn't trust me—now?" he asked.

"Could you ask it?" She raised a slim hand to brush back defiant, wind blown hair.

"I am asking it," he said soberly. He was very earnest now, was pleading with her to understand.

"You've got more nerve!" she exploded angrily. "Oh," she wailed, and there was anguish in her voice. "I trust you, and you—"

"Lou," he said, and drove the horse up beside her. "Lou, you've got to . . ."

"I haven't 'got to' do anything, for you," she burst out. "Don't touch me. Don't you dare. Let loose of those reins. Let me go. Let my horse go, or I'll—" She raised the quirt in her hand.

"I believe you would," he said and his voice was deadly calm.

"I would," she flung at him. "I'd do anything to hurt you—like you have me. I hate you!"

"But, Lou—" he began.

"Don't speak to me—you thief!"

She slashed her pony with the quirt and the startled animal jumped into a run. Clay watched her charge madly through the masking timber.

"And," he said half aloud, "if I get cut down in this business, and planted, she may live the rest of her life hating me, never knowing the truth . . ."

He turned and his face was a grim mask. With a harsh ghostly laugh he started the whitefaces shambling up the long climb. He had told old Deke Catlin this little bunch of stock would be in the park on top by sundown. And Deke had said, his lips sparring with that wicked smile, that he better see to it that they were. . . .

CHAPTER IV

First Blaze of Battle

An irresistible force had met an immovable object. Clint Parch was swarming in on Deke Catlin, and their horns were locked.

One kerosene lamp burned on the kitchen table in Catlin's ranch house. Ike Liddle leaned near the door and smoked, and scowled. From where he sat Clay Vincent caught Liddle's hate-filled glances. Beside Clay, restless and uneasy, sat The Conejos Kid. There was a war-pot full of trouble brewing, and when this was the case The Conejos Kid couldn't sit calmly and not dip in for a helping.

Clint Parch stopped pounding the table, and turned toward Clay. Parch was a six-footer, about the same height as Clay. But he carried more meat; bull muscle that bunched over his hump ribs and shoulders. Parch whirled upon old Deke Catlin.

"I don't stand for you takin' every riff-raff drifter into this outfit up here," said Parch angrily. "You got to get rid of this hyena that used to work for the Diamond Y; you egged him on to run Ike Liddle down the trail."

"Ike was due for a run," said old Deke

With a quick twist, Clay let fly a punch. It connected and Ike Liddle cursed as he went flopping backward . . .

ever so mildly. "I sorta suspect he was under orders from you, Parch?"

"Well, what if he was?" blustered Parch. "I'm the one that contacts the right men down country. Where do you think you'd be, if I didn't fix the tie-up with the others there so you'll not be molested?"

"If any hombre gets the idea he wants to molest me," drawled Deke, "let him begin molestin'."

"You listen to me," began Parch.

"I'm through listenin'," said old Deke, rising up to his full, slatty height. "I'm sick an' tired of hearin' you say, 'listen to me.' Now you hark to me, Clint Parch." The old man shook a bony finger in Parch's face. "You've got too high an' mighty for me, so you have," he blared. "You think your political friends can protect you. They can't; not from me. It seems to me there ain't been all the returns out of the last two drives—"

"You think I held out some money then?" Parch demanded.

"I'm just dang certain you did," cut in Deke. "If you can't be an honest rustler, Parch, don't try to be any kind. I'm moral certain you cheated the kitty on the last two drives; I've got figures that'll prove it. An' I'm through with you. I'll go it alone. I've got enough dead wood on you to send you to the pen for life.

"But you'll help with this drive that's comin' up. You'll see that the stock is took care of down beyond the Rehatilas. An' you'll account for every cent of it. I shouldn't ought to give you a break, but I'm somethin' you ain't; I'm an' honest rustler, so help me Judas."

"I'll get the law—" began Parch.

"You'll get it, an' in the neck," Deke bellowed angrily. "If you want to be an honest rancher, that's none of my affair, but you'll stay peaceable, an' keep off my trail, or I'll hang you high an' dry. After this drive I'm goin' on my own."

They stood facing each other, a thin edge only between hot words and hotter battle.

"Goodbye, Clint," said Deke very softly. "Close the door on the outside when you leave."

"You can't throw me out," Parch roared.

"The hell I can't," returned Deke, and he jumped, caught Parch before the surprised stockman could move, and with handgrips on collar and pants, old Deke rammed him toward the door.

"Hold it, Liddle," barked The Conejos Kid suddenly. "Just hold that pose!"

Ike Liddle's half-drawn gun hung in the holster as he stamped into the night.

"That piute gettin' set to shoot me in the loin," growled old Deke. "Thanks, Conejos, for spikin' the play."

"It seems," drawled Conejos, "that gents around here are on the fight most premiscuous. Come some time, when I might lose my head an' cut didoes."

"There'll be didoes if Clint Parch thinks he's goin' to run me," snapped old Deke, as he stomped out of the room.

"It's about all set," said Conejos softly to Clay. "Better'n we ever hoped. That was a pretty big ear full, I'd say."

"Let's not talk about it," replied Clay dourly.

"It was yore idee," retorted Conejos shortly.

"It was, and I'll go through to the end," said Clay. "I'll welcome the day."

"Don't get lathered an' jumpy," admonished the sawed-off man. "Day's comin' on the gallop."

The next morning Deke Catlin's seamy-faced crew rode hard. There was a heap of ramming around through the thickets in the Little Wolfs. Cattle with strange brands, were choused out of the brushy hiding places, and rammed into a herd.

Men came in to wolf their grub and hit the bunks. There was short talk among them. Cattle with worked brands might be located in the plateau parks by cattlemen from the lower country and no harm done. That was no evidence against anyone. Once away through the Rehatilas, into other hands there would be faked bills of sale.

But there was danger on the drive. From the time the cows were bunched until they were out of the canyons south of the Rehatilas, discovery meant serious trouble.

Sundown came and the herds were thrown together in a park out from the ranch. Catlin's riders strung out through the dusk, on a back-trail to the headquarters. Conejos and Clay were at the head, not far behind Deke Catlin. They jingled into the ranch yard, swung toward the corral. As they came in sight of the hitch rack at the ranch house, old Deke reined in, sharply. There were a half dozen horses tied there.

"Thought for a minute," he said gruffly, "that we had unwelcome visitors. But them's riders from the Parch ranch, come up to help haze the gather. Parch'll be here maybe. Dang his breath an' vitals."

"There may be trouble," growled Conejos as he got close to Clay while they pulled saddles.

"Let trouble come," said Clay under his breath. "We figured on it, didn't we?"

The Parch riders who had finished feeding, were grouped on the porch; a silent

bunch, full of the same tension that filled Catlin's men. Parch was with them and his meeting with Deke was strained and gruff.

Supper was a business affair. The men came to the oilcloth covered table to feed and proceeded to do it. Meals of the day or so following would be grabbed on the run. Finally each Catlin man stacked dishes, walked solemnly to the wreck pan, and dumped them in. All filed out to lounge a few minutes on the porch. Talk had started there, and cigarette ends glowed in the dark.

The Conejos Kid struck a match, touched it to his smoke, held it, to be sure he had his light.

Inside the house, muffled by the walls, the cow country telephone bell tingled. Old Deke kept the phones as much to listen in on talk going on as to put through any calls. In the short silence that followed, a man leaning against a pillar sucked in his breath.

"Who's that fellow who just struck a match?" he demanded.

At the first sound of that voice, Clay felt his nerves jerk. There was threat in every word.

"Oh, that was The Conejos Kid," said a Catlin man. "Rode in with Clay Vincent."

"Who's The Conejos Kid?" the Parch rider at the post challenged.

"I know that rascal," hissed Conejos close to Clay's ear. "Cow-thief. Saw him in jail."

"Who's this Conejos Kid?" insisted the rider. "How did he get here? Where's he from?"

"What's all this to-do about?" demanded Parch loudly.

"Conejos is vouched for by Clay Vincent," said the Catlin man. "He's on the dodge too."

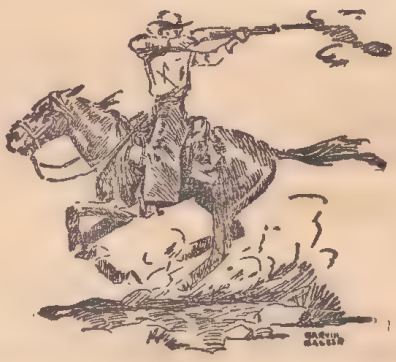
"The hell he is," roared the Parch man. "The merry *hell* he is! That fellow's a law officer from over at Cucharas."

"You're crazy," blurted a Catlin rider, "Deke okayed him and if Deke says—"

"Damn Deke Catlin," shouted Parch. "That old fool—"

"Who says I'm a fool; you, Parch?" Deke Catlin came out of the lighted door. "You just came up here to make trouble. I'll make you eat that!"

Deke jumped at Parch. There was a



hot, quick scuffle as Parch men swarmed around their leader.

"There's somethin' phony about this," yelled the Parch rider who had started the argument.

A gun blazed. The bullet ripped log walls between Clay and his partner. The excited yammer of the two packs, surprised, uncertain, with fight tangling all through them, covered all other sounds except the angry scuffling of boot soles on the porch. They had been all triggered for trouble with Parch coming and snapped into the row almost by reflex.

"Hands and knees," husked Conejos as he pulled Clay down beside him. "Off this end of the porch, quick."

The shouting lifted back of them, old Deke blaring out one command, Parch another.

"What next?" demanded Clay.

"Lam out to beat hell," hissed Conejos. "You get to the phone, quick. We've got the deadwood on this outfit. I'll get to their horses at the tie rack and shy them loose. Grab two. Meet you back of the house in a second."

Conejos started running on tiptoe into the dark as Clay ducked, and sped around the house. He paused at the rear door. The wrangling was hotter on the porch. Bad blood between leaders of the two factions would give only minutes for what had to be done. They might iron out peace any moment.

Clay lifted the latch of the plank door, drifted like a shadow, gun ready, through the passageway. He felt for the telephone that hung on the wall of this vestibule, clutched the bell with his hand to muffle it, and ground out the signal for the Diamond Y. There was a wait of what seemed hours.

There was more confusion out in front. The Conejos Kid had cut loose the Parch horses and they were stampeding over the dark ranch yard. Guns began shearing the night. The Kid was yelling bloody murder. Both Parch and Deke were ordering the men to stop the horses. Clay cranked the telephone again, desperately, and heard a receiver click off the hook. Louise Russell's voice came faintly.

"Lou," he said, "this is Clay."

"Didn't I tell you I never wanted—" she began hotly.

"Listen," he cut in. "Read that letter I gave you, quick. Do you hear, Lou? Read the letter. Understand? You've got to—"

The wire sound in his ear snapped and he knew the phone had gone dead. He whirled about. Someone was coming through the door from the kitchen. Clay slid along the wall, stopping beside the woodbox.

"You didn't get much of that call through, did you, Vincent?" rasped the voice of Liddle. "I'll fix you!"

A gun blazed in the dark. Clay's hand reached and he got a chunk of wood. He tossed it against the far wall. Liddle shot at the sound. Clay grasped a second piece of wood, swung it against the shadow, heard the sodden thump and saw Liddle fall, limply.

Then the back door slammed open, and Clay his gun drawn, heard the voice of The Conejos Kid. "Hey, Clay. Listen, we've got to slide in and get our rifles. There's going to be hell tearin' around here."

The Kid started into the kitchen on tiptoe. Hit his foot against Liddle; grunted as he realized he had stumbled over an inert man.

"Tally one," muttered The Kid thinly. "Come on, before someone comes back into the house. They're all swarmin' at the corrals now."

Silent as winging bats, they sped across the dimly lighted kitchen, on into the passageway to riders' quarters. The whole building was deserted.

"Here, get a holt," whispered Clay, as he shoved a rifle into The Kid's hands. "Here's the shells. What's that?"

They both pivoted just as Parch and Deke came slamming into the kitchen. Old Deke was swearing wickedly and his arms were waving.

"They'll be bottled on this plateau," he rasped. "You leave this to me, Parch. I made the mistake. You leave it to me. They're up here, an' they can't get down!"

"Then get your men on the lope," shouted Parch angrily. "Get somethin' done. Skin 'em out; both of 'em. I'll take Vincent's hide myself if I get a chance."

"We've got to get those cattle into the Rehatilas," broke in old Deke. "We've got to get them into those mountains, quick."

"You're not goin' to drive—"

"The hell I'm not. I'm gettin' them worked brands out of my territory before any rumor of this has a chance to get down into the Calcite country."

"Stop Vincent and that guy with him before they get goin'," burst out Parch.

"Sure," blustered Deke. "But I ain't takin' unnecessary chances. Them cattle's

got to be shoved to where they'll not be found in case one of these piutes gets away. Them cows is on my range an' their brands are worked. I'm hooked if anyone comes in before they're drove off."

"In here," ordered Clay, his lips close to The Kid's ear. He pulled his partner into a side room. "Out through a window. They're heading this way."

They slid to the window, lifted it. It squeeked, and in the moment when Clay paused on the sill, before sliding out, he heard both Parch and Deke start into the hallway.

The Conejos Kid took the lead as they started into the pines back of the ranch house. Down at the corrals, riders were shouting. A few of them were in their saddles. The manhunt, to cut down Clay Vincent and his partner before they could get off the plateau, had started.

One of the horses The Kid had cached in the thickets, suddenly whinnied.

"That's hell," burst out The Kid.

"Get going," snapped Clay and threw himself into the saddle.

He hit off on a side road that took them slaunchwide away from the ranch buildings. There was no time to cover retreat by going slowly now, for riders were pounding around the corner of the house. Then a gun blazed.

"Scorch 'em," cried Conejos, and let fly.

Clay's shot, in the direction of the corner of the house was followed by a savage yell.

Then they were pounding along the dark road, bent low, to avoid being raked off by branches while back of them the riders of the Little Wolf hills were in full cry.

"Dodge," ordered Clay as they came into the open. "Here, hook back, to one side, into this thicket and hold that crazy horse's nose."

The charge of the outlaw riders swept down the road, belched into the little park, drove on.

"Did your telephone call get through?" demanded Conejos.

"The wire was cut; or maybe she hung up," said Clay flatly.

"Well, if that call didn't register, we're goin' to get slaughtered," said Conejos dryly. "This may be our last ride, son. Let's get goin'."

CHAPTER V
Cattle Drive

At the head of Rough Creek, Clay reined in sharply. The trail dipped darkly down a corridor between cliffs. Both Clay and Conejos listened. Horsemen were ahead of them in the night.

"They've blocked us," said Clay thinly. "Just as sure they'll send someone over to block the cattle drive on the ledges."

"Might try gettin' down the cliffs on foot," suggested Conejos.

"Break our necks," answered Clay. "We have a chance if we tie into 'em when they start drivin' those cattle. Hold 'em from getting into the Rehatilas."

"That's a wild chance," said Conejos.

"It's one we'll have to take," replied Clay.

"All depends if that girl read your letter," observed Conejos. "If she did, that's the play. If she didn't we're goners, sure."

"I'm banking on Lou," said Clay soberly.

At dawn, when little drags of mist shredded through the tumbled hills, Clay and his partner stood beside their horses on a pine-crested hump and watched the riders string out from Catlin's. One solid little bunch headed toward the place where the cattle waited. But there were several other bunches that zig-zagged as they rode, and headed off at angles.

"That biggest bunch of riders is going to start the drive," observed Clay. "We better cut around and get set to stop it."

"It's brazen as hell, two of us tryin' to bust up that move," remarked Conejos dryly. "Well, I chawed on a brass teethin' ring when I cut my teeth. Let's jingle."

Back of the second hill, where they rode at a lope under cover of the spotty timber, they heard the three-shot signal.

"Picked up our tracks," suggested Conejos.

They hit into a faster gait, passed a little ledge that hid the view ahead.

"Golly-be-dam'd," burst out Conejos and reined in.

Three of the Little Wolf riders, called by the shot signal, had ridden headlong into the far side of an open park. For a moment all the riders froze in their saddles. Then a Catlin man dragged at his saddle boot.

Clay heard the rifle blare at his side. His own shot was a cut second later. They whirled.

"Not that way," shouted Clay as he drove his own horse to head Conejos away from the tangle of rock slide above the park. They had to ride into the open, or be turned back into the mess of trackers behind them.

A bullet whined close to them. Conejos took snap sights. The Catlin riders were milling into the edge of the timber. A splatter of bullets smashed a rock face beside Clay and his horse squealed in fright, then went rocketing into the first timber. The next moment Conejos was beside him, calling a halt.

"Pelt 'em good," rasped The Kid. "Slug 'em back an' make 'em respectful,"

He pumped shots through his smoking rifle. The Catlin riders who had been heading into the open in full cry, swerved and dived back for cover.

"They'll wait for their gang, now," said Clay, lowering his own gun. "Let's make the most of it."

They cut through two valleys, came up on a saddle, and saw the cattle herd ahead. The drive had just started.

"Come on," ordered Clay. "The narrow draw a half mile over is the place."

Again they rode through the timber, over another saddle, and up to a jutting knob.

"If we're headed for heaven," remarked Conejos dryly, "this is a good place to jump off. If we're headin' the other direction, it's a place to start to skid."

Then they watched, muscles tight, as the drive came into sight at the far end of the open swale between two guardian humps. The column of beef stock swung along in a thin wedge, while outlaw riders hazed the flanks and a little group rode in the dust of the drag. Midway of the park, the back group halted. A cluster of riders had come up from behind.

"There's news for 'em to chew on," remarked Clay darkly. "Let's give 'em some more to think about."

"We're goin' to have to answer for killin' somebody's beef," said The Kid, and drew a bead on the lead cow.

The foundering of the stricken animal halted the march of the stock. Clay grunted as he cut loose. Conejos fired again. The steers and cows eddied back from the mark of death ahead of them. One band broke and started to run back. The whole herd turned.

"Head those cows!" The shout of Deke Catlin was wafted up to the bald summit where Clay and Conejos lay watching.

"Give them the smoke," raked out The Kid.

The riders of the Little Wolfs bunched a moment. Then they split, some of them starting in a circle toward the pine-topped knoll where the two rifles were blocking the drive.

"It's hell and repeat now," said Conejos, as he let fly at the first rider.

A horse floundered, and the column coming to attack broke into a running charge. They whirled into a thicket

of pines, came out on the other side, dived again into cover.

"The drive's starting again," said Clay. "Stop that!"

He threw down on the lead animal and it kicked and fell. The herd, bewildered, swerved and started up toward the slope.

The sharp rattle of riders coming from the side broke above all the clamor; the chilling whine of bullets, followed by the flat snap of the discharged rifles, cut like whip-sounds.

"Circlin' an' closin' in," stated Conejos. "Injun ridin' they are."

Clay said something, he wasn't sure what, and found sights on a lead rider. The horse went down. It wasn't kill on his part; only beat them back, hold them, long enough.

And he wondered how long that might be. Too long if Lou Russell had not read the letter he had given her.

"Goin' to get hot," said Conejos as the Little Wolf gang strung wide, and started their circling riding.

"Hot," agreed Clay, and he smashed away at a form that had dashed between two clumps of pines. "Shot wasted," he added, as he saw the rider plunge on.

The whine of bullets was a song to make a man cringe. The slap of lead on the rocks behind which Clay and Conejos crouched, were vicious, deadly sounds. The attackers were driving in, closer. Some were getting up on the nearby hummocks to snipe.

"Awful earnest, ain't they?" drawled Conejos.

He ducked as a bullet cut so close that the air swirled in its wake.

"Too many of 'em," said Clay tightly. "While one side beats us in, the other comes up on us a little more."

"Cattle; look at the cattle," said Conejos abruptly.

As he hitched to drive a bullet into the reformed herd, he gasped.

"Hit?" demanded Clay as he spun about.

"Nicked my elbow," groaned Conejos, and he slid down, sickly white, clutching his arm to squeeze out pain. "Shootin' arm, too. Gosh, Clay—"

Clay Vincent turned. His partner was out. Only one gun now on the knob, and more than a dozen coming on the storm. He shot his magazine empty, dropped the gun. Then he picked up the one Conejos had been working and emptied that.

"Here," whispered Conejos, gritting his teeth in pain. "Managed to fill 'er for you. Give 'em hell."

"Hell ain't enough," said Clay thinly. "Parch is coming head on."

The charge that started as the attackers realized one gun was silenced, broke through the open timber, up the slope, in a wild, yelling stream. A half-dozen men pouring up the slope, rifles belching, horses rearing, until targets were hazy and uncertain.

"Look," said Conejos. "Somethin' doin' in the valley."

Clay glanced down into the valley as he turned to pick up the loaded rifle.

"Calcite outfit comin'," yelled Conejos.

"Not fast enough," grated Clay. "So is Parch coming and he'll get here first. Kill us to stop our giving evidence."

He whirled to face the wave of death that was thundering up the slope and let out a yell.

Out from the far corner of the park, from the direction of the ledge driveway, broke a charge of men, Diamond Y men.

Then Clay's heart chilled. He knew the figure in the lead. . . .

Lou Russell bringing the men of the Diamond Y. She had read the letter; she knew the whole business.

With a fierce curse, he turned on the Parch men, and jumping from cover, to where he could crouch beside a skinny pine, cut loose with all he had. The face of the charge crumpled. A bullet tugged at Clay's side. He yelled again, and con-

tinued to pour lead. The charge turned. He was driving it back to meet the Diamond Y.

The whine of bullets stopped. But guns were talking in the valley, and as the Parch gang rode into the open from their frustrated attack on the knob, the powder of the Diamond Y burned red. Clay started down the hill, yelling. For Lou to get back; to get back from the shuttling death that whipped across the open spaces of the Little Wolf meadows.

The charge of Parch turned, trying to cut back around the knob, to where the battle was boiling in the meadow; where the cattle herd now was in full stampede, trying to drive up the impassable slopes that hedged in the valley.

Clay dropped to his knee and shot with cold, spaced deadliness. The horse under Parch stacked up. Another went kicking sidewise, and shattered the gang with Parch.

The Diamond Y charge was in full yell, came head on, smashing at Parch. Another horse went down, and its rider lay still. A rider with Parch suddenly thrust his horse aside, and raised his hands. It was a signal. Another lost heart. On the ground Parch, whose gun was flung from his hand as he fell, was gophering back of a little rock, trying to screw down into shelter. Clay saw Parch look around, knew Parch had sensed that the jig was up. Then he saw Parch rise, hands high, and start weaving toward the covering guns of the Diamond Y.

Clay stood swaying. Guns had stopped back at the herd. Surprise, the fierceness of the assault, had done their work and Little Wolf outlaws were trying to grab the sky.

From below, Clay saw Lou Russell start her horse up toward the crest. He hesitated, then turned back to his partner.

"Hey, Kid," he said huskily. "Kid, the war's busted. War's busted, do you hear?"

But The Conejos Kid, his rusty freckles sharply clear on his ashen face, was out.

CHAPTER VI

A Handsome Job

Lou Russell's face was white as she threw herself off her horse. She clambered over the rocks at the top of the knob, and almost fell into the space that had served Clay and his partner as a fortress.

She looked at The Conejos Kid and gasped. Then she whirled toward Clay. "You're shot," she said huskily. "Oh, Clay, they got you too!"

"Steady," he replied. "I'm nicked maybe. Didn't feel it, honest."

"But—" she began.

"No time to argue," he said gruffly. "Hold my horse while I get Conejos in the saddle and down to where we can stretch him out. He may be worse hit than I thought."

"Clay, you've got to listen to me—" Lou began again.

"Don't argue," he snapped, for he was looking at the graying face of The Conejos Kid. He felt The Kid's pulse. It wasn't pounding like it should. "Here, I said, hold this horse."

As though in a daze, Lou Russell held the reins. Clay slung Conejos over the saddle, then climbed on behind. He started down the hill before Lou could remount her horse and headed for a little stream in the park.

As he rode, he saw the drama in the space between the choppy hills that guarded the trail to the Rehatilas. Diamond Y men over where Parch still reached for the heavens. Up in the park, the stampede broken, cattle were moving in some places, and at others the bewildered animals had halted and were turning to see what had happened to stop the thunder that had whipped through the valley.

But somehow things didn't measure up, as Clay had thought they would. There was no feeling of victory as he looked at the man in the saddle before him. He hit

the ground where the slope was gentle, and drove hard, reached the stream. He slid off, and caught Conejos as he slumped. Then he was kneeling, ripping away The Kid's shirt where a red stain showed sticky and clotted.

Lou rode up, threw herself off the horse, and shoved him aside. Her face was white and drawn, but her lips were firm. She began working on the torn arm. Clay went to the stream, got a hat full of cold, clear water, came back, and cupped his hand. He splashed the freckled face of his partner.

The Conejos Kid gasped, thrashed, and threw Lou off balance as he sat up.

"Say," he said groggily, "what happened?"

"Lou read the letter," said Clay shortly. "She followed directions and brought the men. And you got cut up."

"Oh, Moses," exploded The Kid. "Fight finished with me out like a cow in the dark. Where's my smelling salts?"

He shook himself, and turned to Lou who had reached for his arm, and said something about a bandage.

"Oh, stop," said The Kid. "That ain't no more than a skeeter bite. Honest. Just raked a nerve, I guess. Look—no depth to it at all. An' I checked out, blank as a sheet of white paper."

"Lou," said Clay, turning to the girl. "Lou, you said—"

"I said I didn't trust you, Clay Vincent," she burst out. "But I do. Clay, I do. The plan you wrote in that letter, told a lot. When you telephoned, and I read the directions in that letter, telling me to get the Calcite men to come this way, armed and fast as they could— Oh, Clay—" a sob caught in her throat.

"Here, buck up," Clay said.

"I can't," she whispered raggedly. "I can't think of you having to run now."

"Run?" Clay said uncertainly.

"Yes," she said hurriedly. "There's that handbill. That says they want you for what happened to a man named Alve Dissmore. Clay—the sheriff came up with the men over there by the cattle."

The Conejos Kid chuckled suddenly.

"What's funny?" demanded Clay tartly.

"I don't know," said Conejos. "Maybe it's the heat. But it's enough to get a chuckle from me."

"Clay, quick; they're coming," said Lou desperately. "Ride down the ledge trail. You can still get out of here, down the ledge trail. I followed you that night when you came up with our whitefaces. That's why I was able to bring our men up that way. I'll go down with you. To the ranch. Get fresh horses. I'll ride with you." Her voice raised sharply.

"You'd do that, knowing about that handbill?" asked Clay soberly.

"I would," she said vehemently. "Only—Clay, you can't wait here."

"There's a gal to tie to," observed Conejos. "If you don't marry her, son, I'll spread my loop. I always know thoroughbreds."

"What's all this talk?" demanded Lou, whirling to face Clay. "Why don't you?"

"I've got to wait for the sheriff," he said steadily with a glimmer of a smile.

"You're giving yourself up?" she demanded.

"Waiting for the law, and whatever it offers," he said evenly. "There's something to be made clear. Steady now, here they are."

"Clean scoop," said the lawman, as he swung down and came forward with Porter Russell. "Little Wolf gang busted wide open, caught red-handed with the goods. Parch with 'em."

"Clay, you can't surrender!" said Lou.

"Hey!" yelled old Deke Catlin from among the prisoners. "Hey! Help!"

"This'll help you," blared Clint Parch. "Take this— Fix you. Lettin' us in for this! You did it."

Men dived. There was a scramble. A man struck Parch down. The little derringer he had drawn and pumped into old Deke Catlin, was knocked spinning from his hand. Deke caved in, writhed, with bullets through the middle of him.

"Done for," raked out old Deke. "Done for. But I'll fix you, Parch; I'll fix you!"

Deke got up on his elbow. Waved a skinny hand. Words poured. Parch was key-man in this; Parch guided the work of the thieving, fixed the politicians, made the deals. Deke Catlin and his gang were honest rustlers. Honest thieves and square.

In a breath, old Deke poured out the accusation. Clint Parch threw himself as though he would choke the words back into the dying man, but men held him.

"That cinches it," said the lawman. "That cleans up the gang."

He turned to Clay. "And you—" he began. Then he stared over Clay's shoulder as though he had seen a ghost.

"Look careful, sheriff," said Conejos. "Don't cost you a cent, so take a good long look."

"Alve Dissmore!" The sheriff's yell cut like a knife through the moment of silence. "Dissmore! Here! What—"

"Dissmore?" Lou turned on Clay.

"In person," stated The Conejos Kid. "Dead men walk in the Little Wolf mountains. High ho—and who's got some rum!"

"But the handbills said—" protested Porter Russell.

"Sure they did," stated Dissmore, alias The Conejos Kid. "That was a handsome job. Clay, you spill the business."

Clay glanced around. Old Deke had sunk back, not even shuddering. Parch was held by two stout men from Calcite.

"Alve Dissmore was one fellow I could go to when you," he turned to Port Russell, "made me out a cow-thief. Dissmore is state livestock inspector over toward Cucharas. We rigged up these fake handbills, making me an outlaw, so Deke Catlin would let me in with the gang. Then we sent 'em all through this section to set up our game. Dissmore came along as The Conejos Kid, played outlaw too. Needed two of us in the Catlin mob, to get the verifying witnesses that would put the deadwood on what was going on."

"But you risked some wild Piute shooting you down for reward money," protested the sheriff.

"Risk might be worth it," said Clay steadily, "if I can come back here now."

"Clay," said Lou Russell. "You *can* come home. Home, to stay."

"That's for you to say," he replied, and he read the answer in her eyes.

"If," said the man who had been The Conejos Kid, "I thought I could pick up a jailer like that an' get a life sentence I'd get myself out a set of handbills sayin' I was wanted an' plaster the state."

THE TRAINED HORSE

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Author of "A GREASED SADDLE," *etc.*

Twister Ringold Knew How To Handle Horses. And White Socks Knew How To Handle Twister...

They were eating dinner at the Clevis ranch, the partners Jeff Bradley and Twister Ringold, when Ooh Fong, by accident, spilled a cup of scalding coffee over Ringold's arm and shoulder.

"Velly sollie, boss," the bland Chinese cook apologized hastily.

But Twister Ringold, huge, coarse-featured, brutal, was not the kind who listened to apologies. His overturned chair hit the wall as he kicked it from under him and lunged at wizened Ooh Fong, who was already flying toward the kitchen. The closed door blocked escape, and a blow from Ringold's powerful left hand sent him smashing to the floor.

Before the slower-moving Jeff Bradley could interfere, Twister Ringold grabbed the half-stunned Chinaman by the nape of his neck and the seat of his loose trousers and heaved him through the open window. Then pulling at his bushy brown mustache, but not looking at his partner, Ringold picked up his chair and resumed his place at the table.

Jeff Bradley opened his lips, but closed them again without speaking. This wasn't the first time that Twister had abused the faithful old cook, or, for that matter, Bradley himself. From bitter experience Jeff knew that he could not whip the big bully, and remonstrating with the fellow only made him sullen and vicious. Yet, as Jeff Bradley stepped outside to help Ooh Fong, he cast at Twister Ringold a look of vast contempt.

Ooh Fong, his wrinkled face scratched from the gravel along which he had slithered, his nose bleeding and his left eye beginning to swell shut, was already sitting up. But the old fellow still seemed so dazed that Jeff Bradley helped him to his feet, and then assisted him to reach his room off the kitchen. There the cook stated briefly:

"Him liftee him's arm. Bumpee cup."

"Somethin' would bump *him*—if I was his size," Bradley returned. "Tried it once and he picked me up by the neck with one hand and shook my teeth loose. You ain't to blame, Ooh Fong, any more than you were the other times when he made a football of you."

"Boss-man Tlistler velly much strong. Mr. Jeff no likee?"

"As much as he likes me. Hell!" with disgust, "I've offered to buy or sell, but his ornery streak's ridin' Twister fierce and he won't agree to nothin' . . . Well, you ain't got to live with him like I have, Fong . . . Goin' to drag it, I s'pose? I'll shore miss you."

Ooh Fong gave no indication that he had heard the direct question. Wiping his face with a clean dish rag, he asked, "Mr. Tlistler not even 'glee to sellie or swappie you his clever horse you velly much want?"

Jeff Bradley shook his head. "Nothin' doin'. I'd pretty near give my interest in this outfit for that pony. But Twister won't set a price. He won't talk trade. He won't even let me ride the horse. He's shore a humdinger, that White Socks," and Jeff's eyes lighted. "Bet I could make the best 'cut' horse of him that ever turned a cow . . . Still, to give the devil his due, Twister's a horseman. Guess he's forgot more'n I ever knew about training hosses."

Ooh Fong nodded. For an instant a peculiar gleam flickered in the slant eye which was not swollen shut. But Jeff Bradley did not notice it. Jeff, in the prime of life, was a quiet, good-natured individual, not very observant, and utterly guileless.

"Hi, Jeff," a deep voice boomed from the dining room. "You goin' to work 's'afternoon?"

"Sure thing, Twister. I'll start on that piece of new fence down to the lower end of the meadow. But I prefer to work alone."

"Suits me prezactly," Ringold answered. "I also *prefer* to work alone. . . . If you and that damned heathen pigtail are figgerin' to job me or double up on me, hop to it. Or is one Chink grub-spoiler goin' to quit?"

"Me not quittin'," called Ooh Fong, greatly to Jeff Bradley's relief. Things were already bad enough on the Clevis. With the kindly old Chinese gone they'd be unendurable. "Me likee you, Mr. Jeff," the cook added in a low tone.

"Same here," the other murmured.

Immediately thereafter Jeff went out to build fence. He didn't ask what his partner was going to do; he didn't much care so long as the brutal fellow kept out of his sight. This last ruthless, utterly uncalled-for attack upon the wizened old cook who

was unable to defend himself, had stung easy-going Jeff to the quick.

Somehow it made working with Ringold, living under the same roof with him, more than unpleasant and distasteful—as it had been now for months. Again he berated himself soundly for ever signing a partnership agreement with Twister Ringold, one clause of which read:

> In case of the demise of either partner, it is hereby stipulated that the survivor shall unreservedly inherit his deceased partner's share in all real and personal property owned jointly by the partners.

Trustful Jeff Bradley had never given this clause a second thought, nor did it ever occur to him that Twister Ringold might have mulled over it for many, many hours. Jeff's wages, accumulated over a twenty-year period of working for big cow outfits, had gone into the Clevis ranch. But he had been unable to stock the place. Therefore when Twister Ringold appeared with a herd of cows of his own, but no land or range, a partnership had seemed the ideal solution for both of them.

That the arrangement had not worked out satisfactorily was no fault of Jeff Bradley's. The situation had now reached a crisis which demanded that the partnership be dissolved. However, since Twister Ringold had so far refused pointblank either to buy or sell, Jeff, puzzling over the thorny problem, could find no solution.

Had he been at all of a suspicious nature he might have suspected that his brutal and cunning partner had discovered what, to the latter's warped mind, was an extremely practical solution to the problem. This however was not unknown to Ooh Fong, who kept his own counsel and, on this same afternoon when Jeff Bradley built fence alone, was hiding in a cluster of bushy cedars a-top Knife Blade Ridge.

From Rocky Mesa, where the partners ranged their cattle, this ridge jutted out like a long fin. The mesa itself, a high plateau spotted with piñons and cedars and cut by grassy valleys, in nearly all of which were living springs, made ideal grazing land. Furthermore by means of the trail up Knife Blade Ridge, a gradual ascent to this high bench land, it was of easy access.

At the point marked by the cedars, where Ooh Fong had secreted himself, one might step eastward across the ridge approximately two hundred feet and look straight down a rock wall without sighting bottom. It was this particular spot along the ridge trail which Twister Ringold had chosen for his training of a splendid little bay horse with stocking legs and four white feet. White Socks had now reached the point where he knew exactly what was expected of him.

The rancher would come riding up along the trail at a walk, trot or canter until horse and rider were abreast of the cedars at their right. Here, regardless of any expostulation from his rider, any rip of spurs or savage tug on bridle reins, White Socks would swerve from the trail, and dash madly across the ridge to the very edge of the precipice, there to wheel—turn almost on a dime—and go racing back.

One step too far, or the horse's failure to hold his feet on this lightning swift turn, would plunge both horse and rider over the rim to certain death. Naturally the pony had at first shown fear, had been most reluctant to approach the very edge of the cliff. But Twister, evincing astonishing patience for one cursed by such ill-temper, had gradually induced White Socks to do exactly as he desired, until now the fiery little mustang seemed thoroughly to enjoy this game.

Ooh Fong had learned of what was going forward when he had by chance overheard a remark addressed to White Socks by Twister one evening when the old cook was gathering eggs in the stable. Twister had been unaware of the other's presence.

"Hoss," the rancher had stated, "you're

comin' fine, if I could jus' larn you you ain't to mind the bit. That's the hardest dog-goned thing to get through your head. When you larn that, we'll be all set!"

Whereupon Ooh Fong, always suspicious of the huge brute who abused him and bullied his partner, thought, "Him train White Socks to not mind bit? Most unusual. Where Mr. Tlistler training pony what to do? . . . On mesa where him so lately ride muchlee, saying him look after cattle? Me follow Boss-man Tlistler with spy-glass in pocket."

Ooh Fong had used his spy-glass, until he discovered that he might reach the cedars unobserved and there have a grand-stand seat. Today he watched Twister put his trained pony through the usual routine three times, and then vary the program by placing a dummy in the saddle.

The dummy, a gunnysack stuffed with grass and branches and a few stones to give it weight, was tied to the saddle with a string so fragile it would break if the dummy jerked violently, as it was sure to do when White Socks stopped and spun about-face on his hind feet. The horse showed fright when his burden hurtled from the saddle and vanished over the rim of the precipice. But Twister Ringold was right there to quiet the animal and assure him it was all part of the game.

Part of the game indeed! Ooh Fong had from the first sensed the motive and cold-blooded reasoning back of Twister's taking such great pains to teach his wonder horse this highly dangerous trick. Yet one phase still puzzled the canny Oriental.

Twister, as his nickname indicated, was a bronc buster, and an expert rider. The sharp, lightning-swift turning of the cow pony, which would have hurled a tenderfoot over his head, failed to shake the man in his saddle. He could stay aboard with ease. Yet Jeff Bradley, cowpuncher turned rancher, was also an expert rider. Even though caught off guard, no horse could "turn out from under him."

So it ran in Ooh Fong's brain, "Me no can see how Mr. Tlistler hope tlick to work likee him plan with velly much pleasurable looking-forward-to. Mr. Jeff will be still in saddle and velly much secure on horse back after horse turn. Throw great scare into Mr. Jeff. Otherwise great flop."

An unholy gleam of anticipation in his deep-sunk eyes, Twister Ringold now swung to his saddle and rode up the ridge trail to the mesa. Whereupon Ooh Fong took himself home. But of what he had seen and heard he said nothing to Jeff Bradley, his being a secretive soul. Nor was he greatly surprised when, that evening, Twister Ringold amazed his partner by saying:

"Jeff, I've been mullin' things over and I see where I've been a kinda stubborn, damn ornery pard to you. Hell! I get them bad spells. . . . Temper b'iled over on me an' 'twas just plain meanness made me hit the old Chink. I seen that got under your hide worser'n any dirt I ever done you, Jeff.

"But what I'm gettin' at is, I'm 'shamed o' myself, and Jeff, if you still want to buy my share, I'll sell. So you bring Henry Arnold, the banker, out to look the outfit over. By golly, jus' to show you I've taken a tumble to myself, I'll let you ride White Socks while you're showin' Arnold our cattle on Rocky Mesa. What you say?"

"Well, I—" stammered Jeff Bradley. "When you talk that way, Twister, you make me feel like p'rhaps I've been pretty doggoned ornery, too. . . . It's mighty white of you, if you really mean—"

"Shore, I mean it, Jeff!"

Jeff Bradley, excited and pleased, said he thought he could get Henry Arnold out to the ranch by noon, and he certainly did appreciate Twister's offer of White Socks. You bet he'd ride that pony!

Ooh Fong's thoughts remained his own secret. No change of expression crossed his wrinkled, yellow face, not even when

Twister Ringold announced as an afterthought:

"I'll have the hosses saddled and ready when you and Money Bags land at the ranch, Jeff."

With this, Twister went out to the one-room log bunkhouse where he slept, and after lights had gone out at the main house where Jeff and Ooh Fong had their quarters, he produced from his trunk a cinch for a Western saddle.

It was an old, worn cinch, and in range parlance, "stranded" — meaning that a goodly number of the small cords or strands of which the cinch was made were broken or badly frayed. Twister used his jack knife to increase the number of these broken and frayed strands. . . .

An almond-shaped eye, glued to the keyhole, watched the big fellow busy at this rather delicate task.

"Circumstances arise which call for much discretion," whispered Ooh Fong, paddling back to his bedroom. "How Mr. Tlistler expect trained pony tlick to work becomes now most plain. Cinch on Mr. Jeff's saddle to pop as pony turn. Knowing plan of enemy up to certain point gleat advantage. But it makes of most importance Mr. Tlistler on White Socks again visit place s'lected for hollible accident."

Lost in thought, the cook stood motionless as a statue. Eventually he roused himself as from sleep, murmuring, "Ooh Fong takee steps to bling about most necessary return of enemy to jump-off place on trail."

Thereupon he again left the darkened house. His silent feet forthwith took him to the stable where there stood in order on a rack, three saddles—Jeff's, Twister's, and an extra one belonging to the ranch.

Early the following morning, Twister Ringold, having wrangled the cavvy, caught White Socks and fitted to him his own saddle. Observing this, Ooh Fong thought, "Him intend making one last tlaining of clever cow pony. Events move with smoothness onward."

Breakfast over, Twister helped Jeff Bradley hitch a team to the old ranch buckboard and get started for town, after which he put two more saddle horses in the stable. On one of these Twister put the spare saddle, for the banker. He then swaggered from stable to bunkhouse and back again, and with his huge hands visibly shaking, he took from Jeff Bradley's single-rig saddle its cinch, substituting therefor another which he had brought from his living quarters.

Hiding Jeff's good, strong cinch under the waist band of his overalls the big fellow strode back to the bunkhouse. Whereupon down the ladder from the hay loft into the stable slipped the wizened old Chinaman.

After swiftly doing some cinch-swapping on his own account, Ooh Fong returned to the hay loft and there waited with the patience of his race for the next act. Nevertheless, stoical as he was, his nerves tingled and his body felt now hot, now cold. Would Twister ride up Knife Blade Ridge to assure himself once again that the training of White Socks was perfect?

Though smoke lifted from the chimney of the man's stove in the bunkhouse, Twister did not appear for more than half an hour. Eventually he stepped outside, walked to the barn and disposed of two fire-blackened cinch rings by burying them in the manure pile. This done, Twister swaggered to the main house. Although Ooh Fong could not watch his movements there, he felt sure the man prowled all through the dwelling.

"Fong!" Twister shouted. "Ho, Chink! I ain't a-goin' to hurt you. Where are you?"

Receiving no reply, he hurried back to the stable where Ooh Fong could hear him cursing with repressed violence. "Blankety-blank! Where's that damn' grub-spoiler gone? Them Chinks is powerful sly.

Smarter'n you think, too! Could he ha' larned somethin'?"

While thus cursing, Twister had backed White Socks out of his stall, and to the dismay of Ooh Fong, watching events through a crack, the man proceeded to unsaddle the pony.

"Ol' hoss," spoke Twister to White Socks, "I'll jus' put Jeff's hull on your back—for his last ride!"

"Events move in most unfavorable dilection," ruminated Ooh Fong. His one uninjured eye, still glued to the crack, watched Twister Ringold jerk his saddle from the pony's back and then stand frozen. His coarse face became bloodless as he stared at the cinch—the stranded cinch which only last night Twister himself had further weakened!

Abruptly the rancher dropped the saddle. He clapped his right hand to his hip. At the almost insane glare which shone in his eyes Ooh Fong experienced another emotion—that of stark fear. But Twister Ringold's gun was not on his hip. His hand came away empty. He bounded over to the saddle rack, wrenched down Jeff Bradley's saddle and looked at the cinch.

"Mine!" he rasped. "On Jeff's hull! The doctored one on my kak! That damned Chink! I'll—I'll—"

He tore the good cinch from Jeff Bradley's saddle and fastened it on his own. Throwing his own saddle on White Socks, once again, he cinched it in place. Then on the point of mounting he paused, looked up at the hay loft, and ran to the ladder.

As Twister Ringold went up the ladder, Ooh Fong descended in haste through a hay-hole and dropped into the manger of the stall in which Twister had placed a saddled horse for the banker. Swiftly the cook untied the halter rope, backed the horse out, scrambled to the saddle, cried, "Haste is most urgent, Mr. Horse," and dug in his heels.

"I heard you!" yelled Twister. Down the ladder he slid, his spurs ringing as his feet hit the floor. "Wait till I get my hands on you! I'll bust every damn bone—"

He was a moment too late to head off Ooh Fong's mount, and there being no lariat on his saddle, he took another minute to get one before, mounted on White Socks, he rode in pursuit of the Chinese cook.

Ooh Fong clung to the saddle horn with one hand, his other guiding the horse out to the Knife Blade Ridge trail. This choice of trails provoked a grim chuckle of satisfaction from Twister. There were no ranches in this direction; the chances were a thousand to one against the cook's finding any help either on the ridge or on the mesa. There would be no witnesses to what would happen when Twister overtook the Chinese.

They were thundering up the ridge, and though Twister spurred till his rowels dripped red, clever little White Socks, doing his best, could not gain on the speedy old horse carrying the diminutive cook.

As they raced on, Ooh Fong began to feel a glow of exultation. Twister waved his rope and voiced occasional oaths, but he failed to narrow the distance. With both horses almost winded, they neared the spot where Twister had trailed White Socks—a clump of cedars to the left of the trail, a sheer jump off to the right. Unexpected Ooh Fong's gallant mount stumbled, nearly went down, almost threw his unskilled rider.

"Disaster!" thought Ooh Fong. "If Mr. Tlistler win now, him sure to find means to put Mr. Jeff out of way. Him must not win."

Ooh Fong's desperate grip on the saddle horn had saved him. Limping painfully, his horse was staggering onward; with the end of the halter rope, Ooh Fong urged on the gasping animal. He looked back to see Twister's eyes and teeth gleam, a noose in the rancher's rope circling above his head. White Socks was swooping forward.

Another minute and Twister would catch his victim.

Ooh Fong heard him roar, "You're my meat, Clink!" Then, "Hey! What the hell?"

White Socks had swerved from the trail; had swerved at this certain spot just as Twister had taught him to do. Twister Ringold yanked violently at the bridle. But as he had been trained to do, the pony ducked his head, took the bit between his teeth and bolted straight for the rim of the precipice. In vain, the man tried to stop him; tried to turn him. Twister Ringold himself had trained the horse to expect just this, and to go ahead with his trick, regardless of bit and spur and voice.

At Ooh Fong's tug on the halter the cook's mount had stopped. Ooh Fong sat frozen in his saddle, his uninjured eye wide open, glinting strangely as he watched White Socks and his rider.

"Well, go on through with it," yelled Twister. "I can't stop you or turn you, but I'll get that Chink after you do your stunt, good pony!"

"Yes, him velly good pony!" breathed Ooh Fong.

The trained horse knew to the inch how far he dared go. He was at the rim. He dug in his hind feet and whirled on the edge of fathomless space. As he whirled, there sounded a pop like a pistol shot; sounded also an unearthly scream, and Twister Ringold's saddle, carrying the man with it, hurtled from the horse's back to sail over the cliff.

For a moment White Socks staggered, off balance. Then he kicked up his heels, loped to the cedars and stopped. His head hung low; his nostrils were turned wrong side out, his sides heaving, yet he was wiggling his ears as much as to say:

"I did my work well, didn't I?"

Ooh Fong did not approach the trained pony. Instead he gazed up with bland satisfaction at gathering storm clouds.

"Rain come soon," the cook mused. "Wash out many tlacks. Save asking of most emballassing questions by Mr. Jeff and banker man . . . Mr. Tlistler's last pull on blidle reins as he float in air, I observe have snapped reins neatly at bit.

"Most fortunate Mr. Tlistler not inspect blidle and off-side latigo when make discovery of swapped cinches. Velly possible for reins to be weakened, all samee cinch, so they pop loudly when greatly strained. Ooh Fong leave little as possible to chance in plan to oblige Mr. Tlistler to lide up lidge to well-known training ground, in case Mr. Tlistler decide not necessaly to ride there. . . . 'Hollible accident,' Mr. Jeff will say some time today, tomollow or next day. But Mr. Jeff and the banker man not suspect most hollible accident work out likee planned with one exception!"

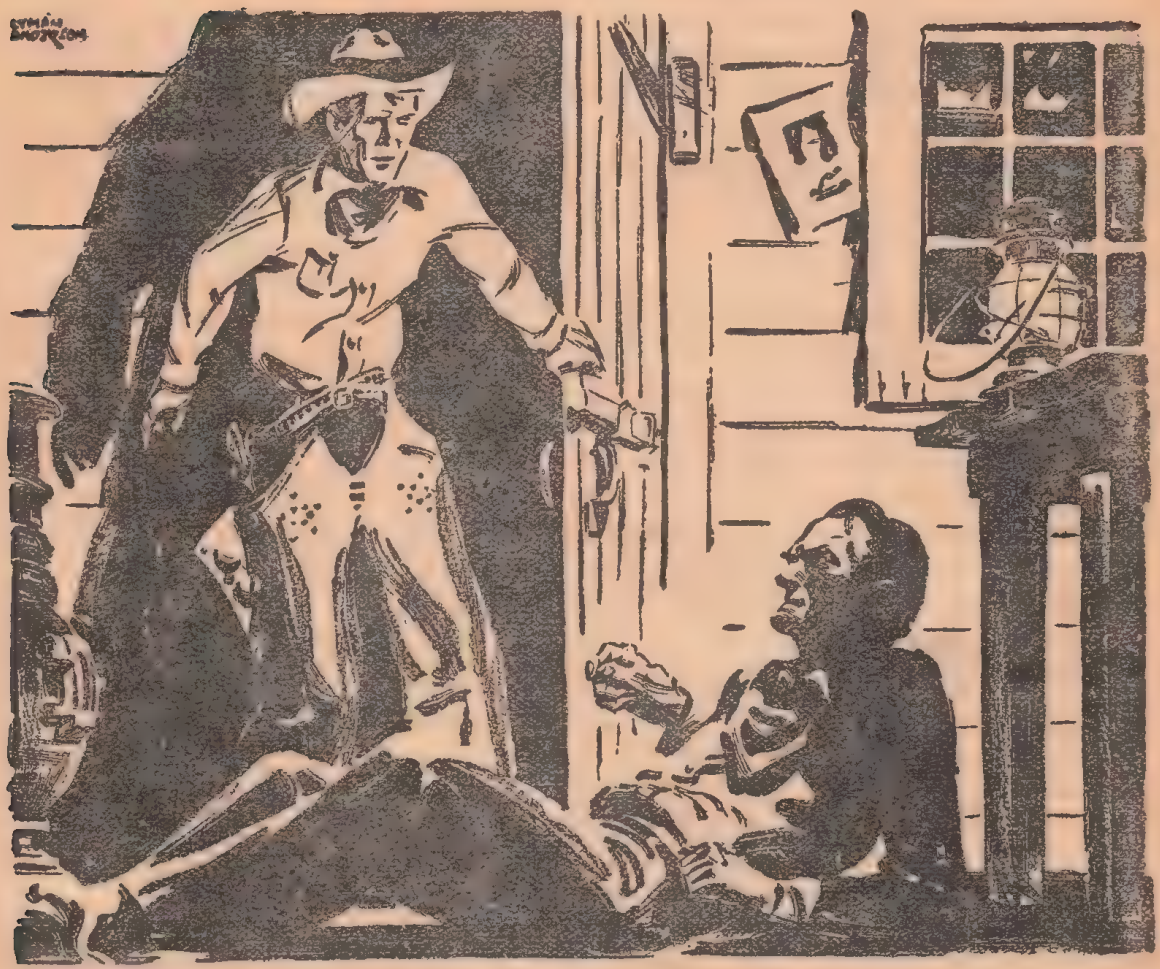
Smiling impassively, the venerable Chinese turned his mount homeward.

The Star on Outlaw Trail

By

CHARLES W. TYLER

Author of "Cut Two Notches," *etc.*



Trent lay there, dazed, shaken. All of the hatred of his warped soul smouldered in his blood-shot eyes.

Old Man Slade had said, "I'll kill ye on sight! S'help me God!" He spat the words out with a dry hiss that carried the menace of a rattler.

That had been a month ago, but Johnny Bates had not forgotten. A desert man never forgets that fanged men are as deadly as fanged snakes.

Purple shadows crept out of draw and canyon mouth and licked up the heat devils that had danced all day. A molten disk dropped slowly to the Big Hatchet

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Slade And His Henchmen Had Figured Out A Slick Scheme While They Waited, Like Vultures, For That Cattle Train To Pass Through Tetcher. What They Didn't Figure Out Was That Deputy Johnny Bates Could Read Morse Code As Well As Brand Burners' Sign . . .

Mountains, almost seeming to melt into their saw-tooth rims. Almost immediately night came on.

Six men rode forth from the fortress-like security of Rock Corral, shod hoofs clicking on the stony trail. Gaunt and thorny as a mesquite, stiffly erect in the saddle, was Old Man Slade. His eye, hard as the rewards of sin, swept backward once, like a cavalry captain surveying his troop; then looked ahead toward that flat, black bowl that was Tetcher Valley.

Trent, the operator at Tetcher station, fumbled nervously for a cigarette. He was annoyed and troubled, and he wished that Johnny Bates would go somewhere else. As a matter of fact, it would have pleased him if Johnny had earlier in his life been drowned in the Salt Canal.

Trent had come on duty at three o'clock. Johnny Bates had been there then. Four hours later he was still there, silent, uncommunicative, obviously waiting.

The operator was thirty, perhaps, with a quality about him of ferret-like subtlety. His gaze was shifty; his little eyes agate-hard. He slanted a look now from a window back of him. Then he darted another glance at Bates.

Johnny Bates was sitting with his back against the north corner of the depot, where the shade was. He wore a star. It was bright and shiny, and dangled carelessly from his shirt, making a rough target for his heart.

The deputy was a sleepy-eyed youth of twenty-one or so. He had been a cowboy. He had a leathery complexion and nice white teeth. The operator had heard a couple of girls on the street agree that he was "cute." About as cute as a loaded Colt six-shooter, Trent surmised.

The telegraph sounder had been silent for a little while. Now it chattered briskly, as Valverde called the despatcher. Johnny Bates got up and walked along the platform. Trent's lids half-shuttered the annoyance that was in his eyes as a shadow fell across the threshold of the open door.

"What does it say when it makes all of them clickin' sounds, neighbor?" Johnny asked, flicking a curious eye at the jerking metal sounder tongue.

Trent did not answer immediately. Valverde was reporting that the Box W was loading the last of twelve hundred steers. Some forty-eight carloads. A sardonic light smouldered in the operator's wary eyes.

"Oh, that's just a train order," he said carelessly. "Tissues for a hot shot meet."

The despatcher was still in conversation with Valverde. The cattle train would start its eastward journey at nine o'clock, or as soon as the Chicago Mail had gone.

Johnny Bates dragged his glance from the sounder and looked at the operator thoughtfully.

"What time will the Box W finish loadin'?" Johnny inquired.

"The operator says not until eleven, anyhow," lied Trent. "They're havin' a helluva time."

Johnny Bates sucked at a wilted brown-paper cigarette, and blinked at the telegrapher through the thin spread of smoke.

"As late as that?" He sounded mildly disappointed. His gaze returned to the sounder.

Trent eyed the other, propped now indolently against the door frame, with increasing brazenness. They said the deputy was fast with a gun. Well, that was all right. He might be able to top one of the rough string, or smoke it out with a six-shooter, but he wouldn't know "Morse," which, under the circumstances, evened matters. Every man to his own song.

The despatcher called Tetcher. Trent reached for the key.

"31, copy 3," snapped the wire. The operator copied the train order, and repeated. When he looked over his shoulder, Johnny Bates was still standing there.

The deputy was as unruffled as a glass-smooth lake, but as Trent's eyes clung for a moment, searchingly, it seemed that this lake had frozen over. The operator became aware of an unpleasant tightening at the pit of his stomach.

Johnny's slow glance went from telegraph instruments to the clock, and back to the operator. Then he turned, and the high heels of his boots reverberated on the plank platform. He walked toward the weathered false fronts of Tetcher's single street.

Trent cursed savagely, his temper at last finding release. His nerves had grown ragged, watching that westing sun hunt the horizon. Why would this stupid fool of a law rider camp on his doorstep all afternoon? He wondered if Johnny Bates suspected anything. He watched until he saw the deputy enter the saloon.

Trent took a mirror from the wall. He held it where it caught the direct rays of the setting sun. A dazzling flash burst from the glass. He turned it away; then back, repeating the maneuver a number of times.

The light leaped from the open window of the depot, squatting at the edge of the sun-baked huddle of buildings that was Tetcher, speaking to eyes on Cloudy Mountain in the language of the heliograph, signaling the hour of the cattle train's flight.

Two hard-eyed punchers, lounging across the street from the station, drifted after Johnny Bates to the saloon. Since his arrival in town at noon, there had been no time when he had not been kept under close scrutiny.

Tetcher was a Slade town. No mistake about that. And the coming of Johnny Bates had been met with the disapproval of a steer in a strange pasture. The hostility of the place was like stifling smoke, lifting with the stench of a burning dump.

The dead atmosphere of the saloon smouldered with it. As Johnny pushed through the door, voices were hushed and heavy-lidded glances traveled back and forth. Four or five men leaned on the bar. Others were slouched at tables.

Johnny's eye canvassed the interior with sleepy indifference. He looked at the bartender, and said, "Howdy, neighbor."

The other grunted, his brow darkening in a scowl.

"Reckon the drinks are on me," suggested Johnny.

There was no move. The fat man in the soiled apron said flatly, "I ain't drinkin'."

Johnny Bates eyed him closely for a brief second. Then his gaze wandered about the room, coming to rest at last on a weathered puncher, listlessly toying with a greasy pack of cards at a table. There was about him the forlorn look of a range tramp. He regarded Johnny apathetically.

"I ain't proud," said "Sunset" Jones. "Set down an' let yore feet cool off."

Sunset Jones had drifted in the night before. He had spent most of his time in the saloon, drinking moderately and absorbing local gossip with bovine neutrality. He had the sprawled legginess of a colt, and a flat, expressionless face. No one remembered having seen him before.

Johnny sat down. For the first time, Sunset Jones appeared to notice the star that peeped from under the deputy's vest.

"Law man, hey?"

"Yeah."

"A lovely occupation." Sunset Jones thumbed the cards, and at length laid down an ace and an eight spot, shielding them from curious eyes; then leveled an eye at Johnny Bates, and picked them up.

Aces and eights! Johnny built a cigarette. Dead man's cards. Nice town—Tetcher.

"Let a good man deal," Johnny said, taking the cards. He skimmed through them and turned a nine spot. His

glance wondered casually about him, and he intoned: "Out of Valverde."

The murmur of voices had again taken the edge from the silence, but Johnny knew that he was being watched closely.

When at last drinks had been downed, Sunset toyed with the cards again. He laid down the king of spades and slanted an eye at Johnny Bates.

That would be Slade, Johnny told himself. The black king with the two-edged sword. Next fell the jack of spades—the jack with the dagger in his back. Well, why not? Slade had threatened to kill him. Steps outside drew Johnny's eye to the door.

A big man entered the saloon. Johnny recognized him as Morgan, a brand inspector, who was labeled as a Slade man. Sunset pursed his lips, and his eyes took on a peculiar glint. From the deck he dropped the joker, and looked hard at Johnny Bates.

Then the deputy saw for the first time a possible answer to something that had puzzled him right along. Morgan, then, was the joker in the crooked deck from which Slade dealt.

The Crazy S had no intention of letting old Charley Wolgamuth complete this cattle shipment. It had only been with the help of stock detectives, Sunset Jones, and himself, that the Box W had successfully completed the drive to the loading corrals at Valverde. The trail herd had been constantly harassed by Slade's riders. Twice there had been night stampedes, and gunshots stabbing the blackness.

Charley Wolgamuth was making a last stand on a range where he had come with his girl bride. They were old now, and tired. The ranch was heavily mortgaged. Two fine sons had died in gun duels with the Slades. Brand burners had taken heavy toll.

Johnny's lips tightened. The first shipment in over two years, old Charley had said. He could see the hope in the cowman's eyes, hear the little ring in his voice, as he had talked with him there at Valverde yesterday.

"Mother's ailin'," the old man had said, "an' her heart's nigh broke. She jest sets an' looks out at them tombstones on the knoll where the boys is buried. They tell me there's doctors in Los Angeles that kin help her, if I kin jest git her there.

"We'll have the money now. 'Low we'll stay in Californy—if everythin' goes all right."

It didn't look as though everything was going all right. Slade and his henchmen—of hell's own legion — were here close to Tetcher, waiting, like vultures, for that cattle train.

Sunset started to deal a hand of solitaire. Under his breath, he muttered: "Sabe, yuh knot-head?"

Johnny Bates sucked at his cigarette. "Si."

He climbed unhurriedly to his feet. The cold eye of Morgan was on him, while a sneer curled from the brand inspector's lips. He said something in an undertone to the two punchers who had followed the deputy to the saloon.

Johnny was aware of the tension that came with the sudden hush. He walked slowly toward the door. He could feel eyes, like gun muzzles, prodding at his back.

Sunset Jones thumbed the cards, held carelessly in his left hand; his right hand free at the table edge. He shifted his shoulders a little, easing the pressure of the six-shooter and its shoulder holster under his shirt. With lidded eyes, he alertly covered the going of Johnny Bates.

Johnny went to the hotel for supper. It wasn't much of a hotel, and he wasn't very hungry. But it gave him an excuse to kill time for a little while. The dingy, lamp-lit dining-room was deserted, except for a pretty girl in an apron.

"You're Johnny Bates," she said, smiling at him.

Johnny blinked. "Am I?" he said.

She nodded pertly. "Bad news travels fast."

"Is the grub all gone?" Johnny wanted to know. His appetite was improving.

There was steak and warmed-up potatoes and coffee and pie. Johnny ate in silence. The girl watched him curiously. The smoky lamp sketched little gold glints on her hair and face. She had nice eyes. A feller didn't notice the fly-specked walls and broken plaster, with a girl like that around.

After a while, Johnny said, "How's business?"

"Real good," said the girl. She paused. "Last night Old Man Slade was here, and Morgan. Slade said he would be back tonight."

The girl looked very steadily at Johnny Bates.

"Yeah," said Johnny laconically.

"They were talking a lot with Trent." Her voice dropped a little. It carried a hint of something deeper.

"Bright young feller," Johnny said without interest. He nodded and went out.

It was half past eight. Here and there yellow lights were glowing dimly. Low voices murmured in the silence of the street. A horse stamped restlessly at a hitch-rail. A coyote chorus shrilled beyond the town. A cow bawled far off across the flats.

Johnny Bates looked in the direction of the sound, remembering what the girl at the hotel had said. Slade *was* coming back then, coming back to Tetcher tonight. Morgan was here waiting. It added up all right. He turned toward the depot. That cattle train ought to be leaving Valverde pretty soon. Maybe he could get a report on it.

Morgan was in the telegraph office. He was wearing chaps now, and a belt and holstered gun. His heavy features clouded at sight of the young officer. He stared at the other with a squint that reminded Johnny of a man looking over the sights of a .30-30.

Morgan was said to have a cruel streak, a hair-trigger temper and a gun to go with it.

Trent was there, of course. "You here again?" he croaked.

The telegraph chattered away with a breathless energy that was like a gossipy person panting with scandal.

"How's that cattle train, neighbor?" Johnny inquired, drawling slightly.

The operator flung half around in his chair. "I told you once, you damn' fool!" he stormed. He had Morgan with him now. Anyhow, the deputy was only a graduate cow-puncher. He'd be stretched on a shutter before morning.

"Listen, *cucaracha!*" said Johnny Bates. He grabbed the operator by the collar and spun him out of the chair and onto the floor. "Let's get acquainted. Me, I'm Johnny Bates. My old dad was a brass-pounder for the Santa Fé, an' I learnt what them dots and dashes said before they got done hog-tyin' me with safety pins."

Trent lay there, feeling his head where it had struck the wall. He was dazed, shaken. He looked at Morgan, wondering why the other didn't do something. Then his eyes met Johnny Bates' again.

"Yuh savvy?" Johnny said amiably. "I get plenty information, *muchacho.*"

Trent nodded sullenly. The deputy had known right along then that he had lied about that train-load of Box W beef not being in the cars until nearly midnight. All of the hatred of his warped soul smouldered in his bloodshot eyes.

"You'll pay for this!" he gritted, as he picked himself up. "You'll get it! You wait and see!"

"Well, if my hide is hangin' in front of the slaughterhouse in the mornin'," Johnny said, "it won't have a Slade brand burnt on it."

"You're playin' at raisin' a little hell,

eh?" Morgan said in a flat tone, his eyes narrowing.

"I ain't *playin'* at it none a-tall," said Johnny evenly. "I'm a-workin' at it steady." He stood watching Morgan alertly. The distance was two paces; not a foot more.

"Sit down!" Johnny told Trent. "Don't let me interfere with your work."

"You're takin' a lot of trouble to check on them cattle old Wolgamuth's shippin'," Morgan said.

Johnny nodded shortly. "I reckon."

"You'll have all th' chance yuh want to look 'em over," declared the brand inspector meaningly.

"When yuh unload 'em?" Johnny suggested.

Morgan's eyes widened. "How th' hell did you know?"

"It ain't the first time trail cutters have busted a clean herd," Johnny said. "Reckon yuh forget that Wolgamuth will have a certificate from the brand inspector at Valverde, showin' it's straight Box W stuff."

"Shore he will," Morgan leered with a look of cunning. "But I figger some of it is wearin' burnt brands, an' we're goin' to unload every damn critter—right here."

"Yuh ain't unloadin'," Johnny stated flatly.

"The hell we ain't!"

"Not none."

Morgan laughed. "B'Gawd, you'll find out!"

The train wire sounder spoke with staccato brevity. Red Butte was OS-ing First No. 2. A few moments later Pisgah, the next telegraph office east of Valverde, reported Second Two.

Johnny's eyes grew alive. He glanced at the operator.

"What's that second section?" he snapped.

Trent hesitated. Johnny said, "Mister, I'm a-askin' yuh." His voice cracked like a bull-whip. "I'll pin your ears back an' stuff yuh down a crack!" he threatened.

"It's the cattle train," Trent said thickly.

Johnny's face brightened. "They're highballin' 'em through as second section of the Chicago Mail, eh! That means they ain't likely to stop here."

"They'll stop all right," Morgan declared throatily.

"Not on signal," Johnny said. "I'm runnin' this here telegraph shanty until further orders."

"The hell with the signal!" Morgan shouted. "Slade will be close-herdin' three-four hundred head of cattle out here on the track when that freight comes. We're goin' to swing 'em down with a fusee, an' there ain't an engineer on the road dares run into live stock deliberately."

Johnny Bates knew now what the bawling of cow brutes on the flats meant. Slade was coming. Now he saw the thing clearly. They'd unload the Box W stuff under pretext of looking for burnt brands, and mix them with the range cattle being shoved into Tetcher. Some of these, no doubt, carried blotched brands that would implicate Wolgamuth and make it seem that Morgan's high-handed search was justified.

Once out of the cars, Wolgamuth's steers would never go back. Slade's riders would see to that.

A crooked look of triumph spread over Morgan's face. The man didn't live who could come to Tetcher and dictate to Slade.

Sunset Jones seemed very drunk. He suddenly showered the cards over the floor, and got to his feet a little unsteadily. "Whoop!" he howled, and thumbed his nose at the bartender.

"Kettle-belly," he said, "you're a louse."

The fat man shrieked a curse, but Sunset was swaying toward the door.

The night air appeared to have the effect of a tonic on Sunset Jones. He took the rolled brim of his battered sombrero

in his two hands and settled it firmly on his head. He went to the stable yard behind the hotel and ordered his horse saddled. He rode in the shadows toward the freight shed, and dropped the reins in the thick pool of blackness behind the squat structure.

Sunset walked noiselessly in the fluffy alkali dirt. The door of the telegraph office was open and angry voices came from within. He slouched against the end of the depot, his ears tuned to catch the drift of the conversation.

He, too, had heard the occasional bawling of cattle. A grim little smile played around the corners of the lanky Sunset's mouth. He'd picked up enough while in town to be able to piece out what was going to happen.

A headlight studded the black velvet of the desert saucer beyond Tetcher station, and the roll of a fast-exploding exhaust rippled across the wasteland.

Sunset Jones returned to his horse. He tightened the latigo strap and tested the saddle with a pull at the horn, and settled the carbine in its boot under the stirrup-leather. He led the bronc nearer to the freight shed.

The Chicago Mail was close now. With a scream and a roar it whirled down on Tetcher depot, whipping along at seventy miles an hour. It rocketed around the curve and slammed into the little station with the mad concussion of its going.

No. 2, carrying green!

The headlight stabbed at the desert across the tracks, and found there two horsemen alone, stiffly erect in their saddles watching. The gaunt man in the black, flat-crowned hat was Slade. The other was "Bullet" Johnson, gun-thrower.

Square of light and blurred faces, the sing-song whine of wheels on rail-joints, the shriek of flanges, the leering flash of two red tail lights—and Two was gone, riding down the middle of hell, yet untouched by the flame of it.

Trent OS-ed First No. 2. Dome, to the west, flashed the time of the passing of the second section. And the man with the green eye-shade, who leaned over the train sheet, set down the figures with a kind of grim satisfaction. Two big mountain-type passenger haulers were handling the cattle train, and doing a mighty sweet job of it.

Trent had cleared the board for the Mail. He started to latch the lever back to red.

But Johnny Bates said, "Leave it green!" His words hit the operator like an open-handed slap.

Morgan's laugh was gratingly harsh. "Yuh like t' bet we *don't* stop that cattle train?" he cried hoarsely.

"I copper the bet," said Johnny Bates, "an' lay two to one you ain't here to see it."

The deputy had been standing half facing him, and in consequence the brand inspector did not see the start of the movement of Johnny's right hand. It was fast as the leap of an electric spark. And then the holster on Johnny Bates' hip was empty.

Johnny's thumb laid the hammer of the S. A. Colt full back, and Morgan was looking at a gun. In the dead silence the three could hear the low *sluff, sluff, sluff* of the hoofs of walking horses somewhere outside.

"Neighbor," Johnny Bates said, his eyes bayoneting Morgan, "Slade's out there. Now when the shootin' starts, you're goin' to be the first hombre through the door of hell. Would yuh mind a-holdin' it open until we all get in?"

Trent's eyes loosed a terrified glance over his shoulder. God, what had he let himself in for? Slade had made it sound very simple—the small part that he was to play, here in the telegraph office at Tetcher.

But it was going to be a massacre!

Slade and Bullet Johnson dismounted beside the platform. Small sounds came from the flats, where four riders were setting in motion a close-held bunch of cattle, hazing them toward the tracks.

Behind the freight shed there was the soft creak of saddle leather, as a stirrup strained under the weight of Sunset Jones.

Slade looked around for Morgan. Then he caught a glimpse of him in the telegraph office. He did not immediately see Johnny Bates, however.

"Morgan!"

Old Man Slade caught the flash of a vague, intuitive something that warned him away from the lamp-cast patch of light by the door. He had guarded his movements in a cloak of the utmost secrecy so that neither the railroad nor Johnny Bates could prepare for this daring foray, but suddenly he knew there was trouble here.

The brand inspector turned his head. On his face was written a red, bloated terror.

"Morgan, come out here!" Slade's voice was an imperative snarl. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Look out!" Morgan's tongue was thick with fear. "He's got me covered!"

Slade edged nearer the open door. His eyes flamed into the telegraph office. Suddenly he began to curse with a rasping savagery that was like the whetting of a knife.

He whirled on Johnson. "It's the damned law rider!" His horny hand slapped against the butt of his six-shooter.

Bullet Johnson's range sense, keen as raw flesh, caught the thing that was happening. He dodged, pumping a screamed oath out of a dry throat.

The horseman had come past the corner of the depot like the burst of a dynamite charge. Only by hurling himself to one side in a twisting sprawl did Bullet Johnson escape those flailing hoofs. He fell on his stomach.

Slade threw up his left arm, partially blocking the down-smashing pistol barrel. A stirruped boot cracked him in the ribs. Choking dust erupted from underfoot almost with tornado force.

Then, beating against his brain, was the rapid-fire thud of receding hoofs.

Blindly, desperately, Old Man Slade fired after a horseman who had crossed the tracks and was going like the tumult of hell in the direction of the slow-moving cattle and riders, rolling up from the sage flats.

Bullet Johnson rocketed to his feet, missed his six-shooter and slobbering oaths, he pawed in the dirt until he found it.

Tetcher town awoke from its sullen torpor at the sound of the first shot. Running silhouettes crossed the field of yellow panes. Boots kerchunked over cradling planks. Men yelled. A fat man appeared in a square of light at the saloon and blinked stupidly into the gloom.

Trent's eyes bugged until they were like to spill from their sockets. The lamp in the wall bracket exploded with a deafening roar—or perhaps it was the gun in the hand of Johnny Bates that exploded, and the lamp burst from the concussion. Anyway, the room was plunged into darkness.

When it was lit again, it was by the brief slash of an orange flame. Morgan's eye had caught the reflection of the gun muzzle, as it jerked to line on the lamp. He snatched for his gun, his brain eaten by panic.

It was a fast draw, but as the firing-pin went home, Johnny Bates was moving in. Morgan felt the closeness of a body, and knew that his bullet was homeless.

Johnny hit Morgan squarely on the temple with exactly two pounds and a quarter of Peacemaker Colt, and the brand inspector folded like a jackknife out of use.

Slade and Bullet Johnson concentrated their fire on the telegraph office. Snub-nosed lead battered it broadside. It mattered nothing to Slade that Morgan was

in there. He'd kill a dozen men to get at Johnny Bates.

Two doors opened into the telegraph office. One gave passage to the outside; the other lead into the little shoebox waiting room.

Here Johnny dove. One hundred and seventy pounds hit the panels. The door gave way with a splintering crash and the deputy found himself on his hands and knees. Guns boomed outside, and there were sounds like a fragile house being demolished by sledge hammers in the hands of mad wreckers.

Johnny crawled toward the back of the waiting room and got to his feet. He paused to take account, trying his shoulder, moving his neck and wiggling the fingers of his left hand. He switched the gun over and opened and closed the fingers of the other hand.

"Not a damn thing missin'," he said, apparently a little surprised. Then he found the one small window and straddled the sill.

Time had a most distressing habit of getting up speed when many things were to be done. Johnny Bates knew that to give a freight engineer a couple of passenger hogs to haul a cattle train was like crowning a king for a night.

The man pulling the latch on the head engine on Second Two was like to kick open the throttle and throw the key away, having in mind the idea of burning the tail off the first section all the way in. He would not, however, run a red fusee if he found one smearing up the right of way. Nor would he wittingly plaster the boiler-front with live stock.

But if the two sections were running the prescribed ten minutes apart through the long Tetcher sag, Johnny decided, it would be a miracle. His feet hit the ground, and he paused only to throw a squint at the western rim of the wide-flung desert bowl. And the first thing that hit him was the saber flash of a headlight coming out of Wild Horse Canyon.

Johnny Bates was thinking of old Charley Wolgamuth, camped comfortably in the buggy, like as not playing a little poker with another Box W rider in the rear shack. Old Charley going to Chicago with his beef, riding high and fast in the desert night, thankful that he was salvaging a little from the closing claws of Slade.

There wasn't such an awful lot of time. Johnny wondered how Sunset was making out.

The guns of Slade and Bullet Johnson were silent now. Hot pistol barrels caught their breath, as cartridges from bullet-heavy belts were thrust home.

Johnny Bates came around the corner. His eye swept the semi-blackness, focusing instantly on two human shapes. The Colt kicked hard in his hand. The warning yelp that built up on the lips of Johnson was never completed. It snapped off, as a bullet turned the renegade over.

Slade knew instinctively who spoke there at the corner with a flaming gun. All of the fierce hatred of his powder-blackened soul poured fire in his veins. Feet spread, the grimness of a hawk in his eyes, he faced on even ground the star that had come to light Tetcher Valley with its brightness.

The star that Johnny Bates wore carelessly over his heart, a target for rustler-bred men to shoot at.

Perhaps it was the spirit in Johnny Bates that said, "I don't give a damn now!" Perhaps it was that Johnny was a mite faster. Perhaps Old Man Slade was marked to die, as he had lived—by bullet.

His crashing shot plucked invitingly at the sleeve of Johnny's shirt, but Slade, terror monarch of the red hills, bowed his head and went to join the dead men he had sped on before.

An old mossy-horn steer advanced with mincing suspicion at the forefront of the

little herd that flowed toward the tracks. Suddenly, a yelling demon spurred a hard-running horse out of the blackness. A six-shooter began to vomit noise and fire, almost on top of the spooky beast.

The brute bellowed, wheeled and lunged away. With a clash of horns and a crackling of ankle-joints, the cattle rolled their tails and massed in instant stampede.

Suddenly the air was filled with sounds that drove into the background the flight of the herd and the yelling, cursing riders. There was the piercing shriek of locomotive whistle, and two engines roared full throated down on Tetcher station.

Drumming in their wake came a mighty cavalcade of wheels. Rolling wheels, singing wheels, winged wheels, beating on the rail, as Second No. 2 poured its reeling, swaying length of slatted cattle cars eastward across the desert.

Morgan picked himself off the floor of the telegraph office and slunk away. Mounting his horse at the corrals, he went to spread the news to dusty, snarling riders that Slade and Bullet Johnson lay dead beside the depot, and that Tetcher was now no place for followers of the renegade cowman.

In the caboose of the cattle train, old Charley Wolgamuth was saying, "I'll see yuh, an' raise yuh two."

And the conductor in the cupalo called down: "Light's out in Tetcher telegraph office. Wonder what the hell's the matter."

They laid Slade and Bullet Johnson on the floor in a back room of a general store, and covered them over. Johnny Bates and Sunset Jones looked at each other wordlessly. Then they walked to the saloon. They stood at the bar, and Sunset Jones said: "Kettle-belly, the drinks are on the house."

And the fat man in the soiled apron said respectfully: "Yes, sir."

When A Right Hombre Is Saddled With A Killing And Everyone Believes Him Guilty, He's Got A Man-Sized Fight On His Hands. Curt Riley Was No Quitter But The Green-Eyed Stranger Held All The Cards. Could Riley, Playing A Lone Hand, Prove That A Murderer Always Gets

MURDER MEDICINE

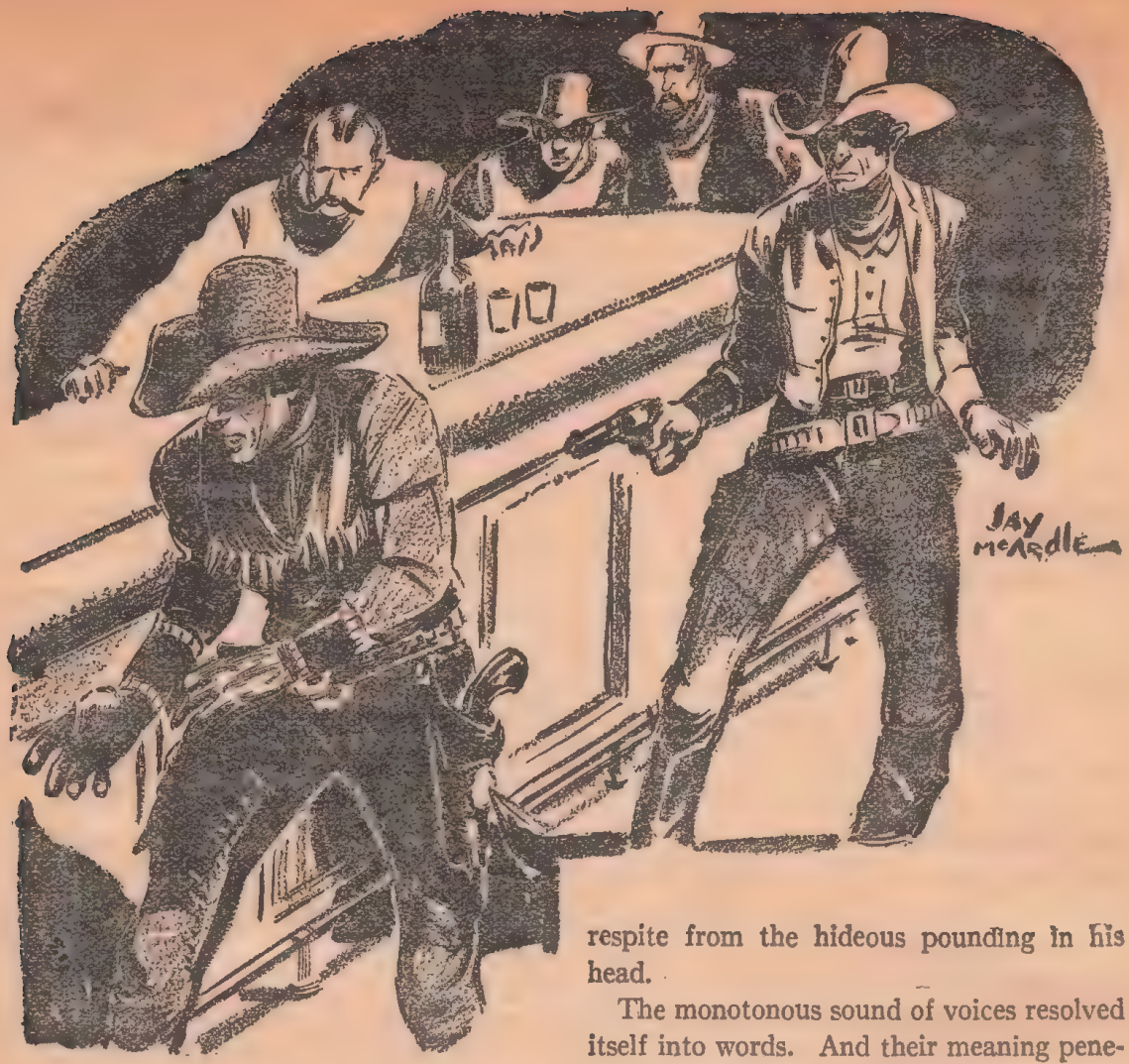
A Six-Gun Action Novelette

By

GALEN C. COLIN

Author of "SNAKE SIGN IN THE SAGAUCHES," *etc.*

Curt Riley tensed as he recognized the voice behind him—the green-eyed pilgrim at last!



CHAPTER I

An Empty Cartridge

For what seemed hours to Curt Riley, that mumble of voices had been trying to break through the steady, jarring pound in his ears. He groaned, as he fought against it. His freckled fists pressed tightly against his ears to drown out the sound, but they only added to the agony in his bursting head.

With an effort he opened his bleary, blood-shot eyes. Bright sunlight came through a barred window, and slashed across his face. He blinked in the brilliant light and closed his eyes almost instantly. All he wanted was cool darkness, something wet and plenty of it for his parched throat, respite from the hideous pounding in his head.

The monotonous sound of voices resolved itself into words. And their meaning penetrated faintly into Curt Riley's hazy brain. He still didn't quite get the drift, but he did recognize the voice as coming from Sheriff Buck Grandon. And the words were disquieting.

"Funny about that hombre," the grizzled old officer was saying. "Curt Riley's been comin' to Granite for five years with the Box Diamond trail herd. Always acted plumb decent an' honest. Full of life, like all younkers, but not a killer."

Curt Riley's eyes popped open now. Slowly, painfully he turned them toward the sound of the voice. Then they widened, and he opened his thick-tongued mouth to speak. But he closed it again with a snap. For now the hazy man who stood beside Sheriff Grandon broke in.

"Just bidin' his time!" Curt Riley knew now that the speaker was Sim Dennison, the banker. "He never had a chance at

five thousand dollars before. Some hombres'll do anything, if there's money enough in it!"

Curt Riley was wide awake now. The implication of the words cleared his head as if a pail of cold water had suddenly been poured over it. He forced himself shakily to a sitting position on the bunk, and put his booted feet to the floor.

"What are yuh two pelicans talkin' about?" he rasped. "What for am I in the jailhouse?"

The men whirled at the sound. Stocky, grizzled Sheriff Grandon's jaw dropped slackly. But Sim Dennison took two swift steps toward Riley. He towered above him, glaring down at the red-headed puncher from beneath shaggy brows.

"No use playin' innercent, Curt Riley!" he snapped. "What did yuh do with the rest of the money? Where did yuh hide it?"

"The—the rest of the money? I—I don't savvy—"

Then the sheriff was beside Sim Dennison. His frosty eyes bored into the prisoner's. "It's no good, Riley! This is one thing yuh can't talk yoreself out of! It ain't no guess-so case—it's plain open-an'-shut!"

"But I don't savvy what yuh're drivin' at!" Curt Riley looked around the little cell wildly, and his voice was thin and high. "Why am I in jail?"

A twisted smile crossed Dennison's craggy face. "Yuh'll be tellin' us next thet yuh don't remember pluggin' Andy O'Rourke, takin' the five thousand dollars he got for the Teacup trail-herd!"

"Pluggin'—Andy—O'Rourke!" The red-headed puncher slumped back, and his freckled face blanched. "Yuh mean somebody downed Andy? An'—yuh think it was me?"

"Don't think so, we know it!" growled the sheriff. "Found yuh layin' beside yore own fire. Two hundred dollars of Andy's money in yore pocket. One cartridge in yore six-gun fired. Tequila bottle in yore fist. Reckon yuh took one more drink than yuh could carry!"

"Yeah, but what we want to know is where yuh hid the rest of the cash!" Dennison rasped.

Curt Riley drew a long, quavering breath. It swept upon him just what he was up against. He might have gunned Andy O'Rourke, for all he could remember. Then his eyes narrowed, and his teeth clicked. He didn't do it. He couldn't have shot Andy down! He was remembering things now, bits of what had happened, and there was one face which stood out clearly through the night's happenings.

He opened his mouth to tell the old officer just what he remembered but clamped it tight again. It was so wild and unbelievable a story that even he would not believe if it came from other lips.

Dennison glared at him a moment. "Are yuh goin' to talk before yuh swing?" he demanded.

Curt Riley shook his head. "All I know is thet I had twelve dollars an' some cents, a credit letter from ol' Tom Grimstead, my boss, a gold watch thet my dad gave me afore he died, my six-guns an' my bed-roll! Ain't got my hands onto another thing since I hit Granite!"

"But thet two hundred—"

Sheriff Grandon stopped the banker with a gesture. Then he looked down at the red-headed puncher. "We found the twelve dollars, an' the credit letter. But we also found two hundred dollars more in yore pocket, an' an empty cartridge in yore six-gun! Yuh'll save yoreself time an' trouble by comin' clean!"

Riley's jaw set grimly, as he lay back on the bunk. "Jest the same, I ain't sayin' anything, until I've had a chance to talk to Slim Murfin. Reckon there's no law against me seein' my straw-boss?"

"Yuh're seein' nobody, until yuh tell

where yuh hid thet money!" Dennison said belligerently.

Sheriff Buck Grandon turned to the burly banker. His old eyes glittered. "I'm still runnin' the sheriff's office, Dennison! An' if Slim Murfin wants to see this hombre, he can!"

Then he faced Curt Riley. "But I ain't so shore Slim'll come near yuh, Riley! Even yore own outfit is right het up over the killin'!"

"Slim ain't believin' I gunned Andy O'Rourke," Curt said confidently.

CHAPTER II

The Green-Eyed Stranger

As the key clicked in the cell lock, and Curt Riley was alone again, he closed his bleary eyes. His head was throbbing again, but he forced his hazy brain to the task of remembering the events of the night before. It was not easy, but he wanted it all straight before Slim Murfin showed up.

Slowly events came back to him, arranged themselves in logical order. He had been hunkering beside the tiny chip fire, down back of the corrals that held the Box Diamond trail-herd. In the distance came the faint sounds of revelry from uptown, where the rest of the outfit were carousing. And where he would have been, if his first job as trail-boss hadn't weighed heavily upon him.

Beyond the corrals, he could see the reflected glow of another fire, and knew that Andy O'Rourke squatted beside it. Andy was ramrodding the Teacup trail-herd, and there had been bitter rivalry on the trail. But in spite of that, Andy was a good friend of Curt's.

Curt Riley groaned. "If'n I'd have single-footed over to chin with Andy like I was minded to, I'd never have seen thet green-eyed pilgrim and all this would never have happened!"

But he hadn't. Not quite sure but what Andy O'Rourke would be angry. He was still debating with himself whether or not to chance it, when the strange pilgrim had glided from the gloomy shadows into the lighted circle of Riley's fire.

His coming was as silent as a prowling catamount. Curt Riley had not been sure how long the man had been standing there, when he looked up and caught the narrowed eyes upon him, heard the low, mirthless chuckle.

He hadn't cottoned to the hairpin, even from the first. Something snaky about the cuss, something of the slinky grace and ruthless cruelty of the catamount. A long, thin face—eyes that glittered green in the firelight like a cat's, hands with the swift, sure movement of a gun-fighter.

Curt had greeted the stranger gruffly, but the hombre glided forward and squatted across the little fire from him. For a long minute neither spoke. Then that mirthless chuckle again. Curt Riley shivered, even now, as he remembered it.

"Kind of tough, bein' trail-boss, huh? Rest of the outfit celebratin' up at the Cinch Ring. Like to be there, wouldn't yuh?"

"Reckon I can stand it," Curt replied gruffly.

The stranger nodded. "Yeah." Then his green eyes narrowed and his long chin thrust out. "Andy O'Rourke has beat yuh again. Sold his beef stuff this afternoon. He'll be headin' for the Cinch Ring right soon."

Still Curt Riley didn't reply. The stranger smirked, as he pulled a squat bottle from his shirt-front.

"As long as yuh've gotto wet-nurse them steers, yuh might as well enjoy yoreself." He passed the bottle across the fire.

Curt Riley remembered it plainly and groaned again. If only he had turned down that bottle! But he hadn't. Just a nip, hardly enough to wet his throat. But it

touched him off, affected him as no other drink had ever done. Made him forget his responsibility, loosed a gnawing craving for more liquor, for noise and lights.

Without a word, he accepted the stranger's invitation to visit the Cinch Ring. And that was all he remembered.

"I'll find out more when Slim Marfin comes," he told himself, as he settled back on the jail bunk.

But the afternoon drew to a sweltering close, and still Slim did not show up.

From the barred window, Curt had a view of only a short stretch of the street. He paced back and forth in the narrow cell, halting every few minutes to stare out.

Several times he had seen hurrying men, a few of whom he recognized. But no Slim. He was getting worried. His ears were weary of listening for Slim Murfin's slow footsteps, for the lanky puncher's drawling voice. He was almost ready to believe that Slim had ditched him.

The sounds from up at the Cinch Ring were disquieting, too. The carousing had changed in tone during the afternoon, was taking on a subtly deadly and sinister sound. Curses were more and more frequently taking the place of ribald laughter.

As dusk changed to darkness, the red-headed puncher caught the more and more frequent pound of hoofs in the dusty street. In the little patch that he could see, he made out riders by twos and threes heading for the Cinch Ring. The worried frown on his brow deepened.

"Never heard but one necktie party gettin' under way!" he muttered. "But thet reminds me of it! Shore don't want to be the guest of honor at no lynchin' bee!"

Twice, during the last hour, the old sheriff had stamped into the jail, tried the barred door, and hurried out. Once Riley called to him, and received no answer. That was disquieting, too. For the noise from up the street had grown to a clamor, the roar of a mob.

Curt Riley's nerves were rapidly straining toward the breaking point. And he tensed, hands clenched into tight fists, as soft, hurried footsteps reached his ears.

"Comin' at last!" he grated, as he crouched in a corner of the cell. "But they'll not take me without—"

Then a low voice trickled through the barred window, a voice that Curt recognized. He drew a long, quavering breath, and his fists unclenched.

"Yeah, Slim!" he breathed. "Been waitin' all afternoon for yuh! What held yuh up, feller?"

"No time for palaver!" Slim Murfin's voice had lost its drawl. It was sharp and biting. "Outfit gettin' het up to swing yuh to a cottonwood limb! Wouldn't even want to see a skunk strung up!"

"But, Slim, I—"

"Don't argue! Are yuh all alone in the jail? Where's the sheriff?"

"Ain't been here for quite a spell! I'm all alone!"

For a minute there was silence. Then the door of the jail opened softly. Feet padded across the floor. The sound of a clicking key reached Curt Riley's ear. The cell door swung open, and Slim Murfin glided inside.

In the faint light that trickled through the bars, the red-headed puncher could see the grim look on the lanky hombre's face, could sense the tight set of Slim's jaws.

"Thanks, pardner!" Curt Riley said shakily. "I've shore been skittish—"

"Shet up!" rasped Murfin. "The less I hear yore voice, the better I'll like it! Get

to movin'! Yuh ain't got no time to waste!"

"Then Sheriff Grandon was right!" Curt Riley grunted. "Even yuh think I gunned Andy O'Rourke!"

"Don't think it—I know it!" Slim Murfin snapped. "Ought to let the mob have yuh, but I can't! But I'd be glad to see the law swing yuh!"

Then he whirled and sped out of the cell. Curt Riley followed him into the sheriff's little office and the lanky man gestured toward the wall.

"Yore six-guns, with one empty cartridge, are hangin' on thet peg! Yore twelve dollars are in the drawer! Hoss saddled down by the corral! Fork him an' hit for the line! Don't ever show up here again, or I'll drag down on yuh myself!"

Slim Murfin whirled on his heel, and strode out of the jail. For an instant Curt Riley stood looking at him, surging anger burning in his veins. Then a twisted smile quirked the corners of his wide mouth.

"Some day, Slim Murfin, yuh'll eat them words!" he grunted.

CHAPTER III
Murder Medicine

Curt Riley moved swiftly, the growing clamor of the mob in his ears. He raced for the sheriff's desk, pulled out the drawer, and searched it with swift fingers. The scanty store of bills and coin were in an enevelope. He shoved it into his pocket, and continued his search. Then his eyes narrowed to thinnest slits.

"Thet watch—it ain't here!" he grunted. "Reckon thet blasted Sim Dennison done took it for himself!"

Suddenly he whirled to the wall. He snatched down his filled gun-belt and holsters, and buckled them around his middle. Then he was out of the door, and speeding down the street.

He was not a moment too soon, for men were crowding each other, as they surged out of the Cinch Ring Saloon, a block north. The voice of the mob had an ugly undertone like that of caged beasts, as Riley heard their curses and yells.

He redoubled his speed, keeping well in the shadows of the drab buildings. As he crossed the rusty railroad tracks, and dodged behind the corrals, he heard the wild uproar from the jail.

"They've discovered I'm gone!" he grunted. "Won't be five minutes, until they find out where!"

Then the shadowy form of a horse loomed ahead of him. He grunted in relief, as he leaped toward the animal. But he stopped suddenly, and frowning, sped to the little heap of ashes that marked the spot where his fire had been the night before.

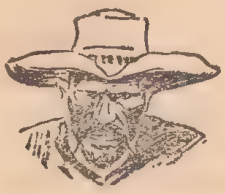
Already the sounds from up the street were growing plainer, as if the mob was sweeping toward him. But he steeled his nerves against it, as he hunkered beside the ashes. His narrowed eyes searched the ground and were rewarded by the glitter of starlight upon an object nearby. His hand darted out, as he leaped toward it. He grunted in relief, snatched up a squat bottle, and thrust it into his shirt-front. Then he raced for his horse.

As he swung into the saddle and gathered up the reins, the pound of booted feet reached him from beyond the corral. He touched the black's ribs with his rowels, and neckreined it to the south. At the first thud of its hoofs on the trail, wild yells came from behind him.

Orange slashes of fire split the darkness. Bullets whistled around his head. He ducked low, and urged the frightened animal to still faster speed. A lead pellet seared the horse's hip, and buried itself in the cantle. The animal leaped sideways, almost unseating the rider, but Curt Riley held on grimly.

A quarter of a mile down the trail, then hoofs thundering behind. The fugitive's lips twisted into a bitter snarl. Like a pack of wolves after a crippled dogie, he told himself. But they'd find this dogie wasn't so crippled, after all. . . .

For hours he raced into the night, with those persistent hoofs pounding behind.



But gradually he drew away from them, left the trail and headed into the hills until at last they faded away entirely. He rode for still another hour before he halted in a little valley and dragged the saddle from his leg-weary horse.

He hobbled the animal and turned it loose to graze. But he took his blankets back up the slope, and spread them where he could catch the first sound or see any chance rider skylined against the gray. And here, sheltered by a huge boulder, he built a tiny fire.

Hunkered beside it, he thought over the situation from the start, slowly and carefully. And he came to some very definite conclusions. Then at last, fearful of disappointment, he pulled the squat bottle from his shirt-front.

He turned the bottle over slowly, and a label came into view. Curt Riley's lids narrowed, as he held it closer. The red and black lettering brought a mirthless smile to his lips.

Dom Pedro Tequila
100 proof
Bottled for
Jem Dorgan's
Perro Rojo
in
San Pedro, New Mex.

San Pedro! The words brought a grim look to the young puncher's face. For he knew the little town by reputation. It huddled like a stinking buzzard in its nest, high in the San Juan range, right where four states cornered. And it held the scum of all four. . . .

Curt Riley had heard it said that if a plague should wipe out every inhabitant of the town, not one would die who did not deserve it a dozen times over.

He lifted the bottle to his nose. There was still an inch or more of clear liquid in the bottle, liquid that should have the raw odor of tequila. He sniffed again. His nose crinkled and his lips twisted wryly.

"Marihuana!" he muttered. "Tequila doped with thet blasted loco weed! No wonder a little nip put me out like a candle!"

Wearily he stretched out upon his blankets and sleep came to him almost instantly. It was as if his brain knew that his tired body would be taxed to the limit, knew that it would need every ounce of strength it could store up.

But even during the soundness of fatigued sleep, Curt Riley's trail-trained ears kept watch. Twice he awakened while it was still dark. Once to turn back his horse which was grazing wide and again when some prowling animal ventured close.

He was up when dawn first streaked the east with pink. And in the saddle again, he turned his horse's nose straight into the southwest. Forty miles in that direction lay San Pedro—and in San Pedro he hoped to find the green-eyed hombre who had drugged and framed him.

Curt Riley knew that the job before him was not easy, that the chances were ten to one against his getting into San Pedro and out alive. But even that single chance was better than roaming the outlaw trail, branded as a thief and a murderer.

He would have thought even less of his chances, if he had seen that rider, silhouetted against the skyline for a fleeting mo-

ment, a rider bent low over his saddle-horn and prodding hell-bent toward San Pedro. For even at a distance of five hundred yards he might have recognized the hombre and guessed his mission. . . .

CHAPTER IV
Wolves of San Pedro

The sun was dropping behind the jagged ridges to the west, when the red-headed puncher prodded his weary horse up the last slope. He rounded a huge shoulder of rock that thrust out over the trail and caught his first glimpse of San Pedro.

A single row of drab, unpainted shacks fronted the single street. On the other side, an almost sheer drop of five hundred feet. Behind the buildings, a steep upward slope, studded with dwarf trees and huge, shapeless boulders.

The trail, which widened for the three blocks length of San Pedro, narrowed again beyond the last shack, and twisted on into the high country. Unaccountably, the little town reminded Curt Riley of the bulge on a sidewinder that had swallowed a toad. His lips twisted into a grim smile.

He pulled his horse to a halt, while he tightened his belt, and tested his six-guns to see that they slipped easily in the oiled leather. He pulled the brim of his wide Stetson low over his thatch of red hair. He flexed his fingers to free them of rein-stiffness. Then he touched his horse with his rowels.

Curt Riley kept well to the right side of the street, almost edging the rim of the sheer canyon. He rode slumped low in his saddle, eyes apparently straight ahead. But they missed nothing, nor did his alert ears.

There was something evil and sinister about the little town, something that he sensed the moment he passed the first shack. It was as if wicked, ruthless eyes peered at him from closely shuttered windows, as if hidden guns covered him at every step.

He told himself that it was his imagination, and forced his mind upon the job ahead. Lights were flickering up in half a dozen scattered shacks, but he was watching the most brilliantly lighted structure. He pulled up, as he came abreast it.

He swung in his saddle, and studied the rickety building. It was the only two-story structure in San Pedro, and the only one that boasted a sign. His eyes narrowed as he made out the words in the gloom.

The Perro Rojo
Jem Dorgan, Prop.

"The Perro Rojo—the Red Dog!" he grunted. "An' the hangout of a green-eyed polecat, or I miss my guess!"

He turned his black straight across the rutted street, and pulled up at the peeled-pine hitchrail. He swung stiffly from his saddle, ducked under the rail, and climbed the three or four steps to the slab porch. For a moment he eyed the interior through the smudged window.

A long, low room, blue with tobacco smoke. A crude bar running the length of one side. Scattered chairs and card tables on the other side. A dozen or more men, mere shapeless forms through the dirty window. Curt Riley hitched his guns just a bit further front on his thighs, pulled his hat brim a shade lower, and stamped across the porch.

He pushed the swinging door open, and stood for a moment in the opening, blinking in the light from the swinging brass lamp. Then his gaze swept the room swiftly. Five men bellied up to the bar, hard-bitten customers. But the man he was looking for was not among them. His eyes roamed further about the smoke-hazy room.

Three of the card tables were in use but the green-eyed hombre was not one of

the players. As he strode toward the bar, Riley was conscious of a face that appeared for a fleeting instant, as the door from the upper floor opened a crack.

But even in that momentary glance, he knew that the face did not have green eyes and a long jaw. A slight feeling of disappointment, tinged with relief, swept over him as he edged up to the bar. But it was dispelled instantly, as he caught the furtive movements of two men further down.

He watched them in the fly-specked mirror behind the scarred oak, as he gave his order to the bartender.

"Tequila, hombre! Dom Pedro brand! I know thet pizen!"

The flat-faced bartender grunted an unintelligible word, and turned to the backbar. The two men were nearer now. The red-headed puncher's eyes narrowed, and his nerves and muscles tensed. But he did not turn, as one of them, a squat, swarthy hombre with a knife-scarred face, edged in between him and the man on his left.

His eyes followed the second, a lanky, long-armed ruffian. He caught the stealthy wink that passed between the two behind his back, and a faint grin flicked across his face. Then he lifted his glass in his left hand, turned slowly and leaned with his back to the bar.

The rest of the crowd in the saloon had edged back, and were watching with furtive glances. There seemed to be an electric tingle in the air. Curt Riley felt it, just as the others appeared to.

And then it happened. The swarthy man reached out toward the bottle of tequila. His elbow jostled Curt's, spilling half the red-head's tequila on the scar-faced hombre. The man rasped a curse, and his booted right foot came up, smashed down heavily on Curt's instep.

For a moment the red-head forgot the long-armed ruffian on the other side. Red wrath surged through him. His fists doubled into granite-hard knobs as he whirled to the swarthy hombre. Only just in time he felt a hand steal past his ribs, groping for his right six-gun, another on the other side, reaching for his left.

He spun on his heel, brushing the hands aside. Then his left hand darted out and grasped a wiry wrist, as the long-armed man leaped back. He jerked on the wrist, a hundred and eighty pounds of bone and muscle behind the movement.

The lanky man hurtled toward him. Curt ducked his right shoulder low, caught the hombre square in the middle. The man bounced back, landing with a jarring grunt. The red-head whirled in time to see the scar-faced man streaking for his guns.

With bewildering speed, Curt Riley went for his own. His six-gun swept up, a fraction ahead of the stranger's. His finger tightened on the trigger.

Wham! A gun bellowed sullenly, but it was not Curt Riley's! For his weapon, with bullet-shattered cylinder, hurtled from his numbed fingers, landing with a thud against the bar a dozen feet away. The scar-faced man laughed shrilly, as his gun left its holster.

But now a voice barked an order from behind, in the direction of the front door.

"Drop it, Pancho! Pronto!"

Curt Riley's back stiffened, and his eyes narrowed to thinnest slits. The numbing agony in his fingers was forgotten for he recognized the voice. The green-eyed pilgrim at last!

He turned stiffly and slowly. The tall hombre stood wide-legged near the door, green eyes glittering in the lamplight, lower jaw outthrust, a twisted, leering smile on his narrow face. Curt Riley's gaze dropped for an instant to the six-gun in the man's hand, then lifted to those catlike eyes again.

With the easy grace of a catamount,

the fellow glided toward Curt Riley. For an instant the leering smile widened, as he thrust out his left hand and lifted Curt's remaining six-gun from its holster. Then he spoke to the cowering half-breed.

"I said he was to be taken alive, Pancho!"

"But—but he was too queeck, boss! He would have dreel me so fas—"

The green-eyed man shot a glance at the lanky hombre, just staggering to his feet. His lips twisted into a snarl.

"Yuh an' Pancho, Blackmer! Ought tuh've knowed better than to have give yuh the job! Alive, I told yuh! He's worth a thousand dollars on his feet—an' nothin' dead! Now get out, yuh two!"

As the two disgruntled ruffians slunk from the Perro Rojo, the green-eyed man turned to Curt Riley. As his six-gun still covered the red-headed puncher, that leering grin broke over the narrow face again.

"Looks like yuh an' me are meetin' right frequent, Riley. Heerd yuh was headed to visit me, an' been waitin' sort of impatient like for yuh to show up!"

"Yeah? Bad news travels fast!" Curt Riley grunted, looking at the man with narrowed eyes. "But I reckon yuh'd have been lookin' for me, even if'n yuh hadn't heard I was comin'."

The hombre shook his head. "Nope. Figured ol' Grandon had yuh sort o' sewed up in thet jailhouse of his, or thet them cow-nurses might have took a notion to swing yuh to a cottonwood limb."

"Did jest thet!" Curt Riley rasped. "But the swingin' is postponed, until they get the right hombre to dance on air!"

The green-eyed man grinned crookedly. "Don't be too sure, Riley! Yuh an' me are headed back to Granite tomorrer. A thousand dollars on yore head—an' I aim to collect it!"

Then the man's green eyes narrowed, and his chin thrust out. "Thet is, unless we can come to an understandin'!"

"What d'yuh mean? Talk straight!"

The hombre gestured toward the door leading into the upper story. "Up in my room! Mebbe a little palaver might help! But no funny business for I'll have yuh covered every minute!"

CHAPTER V
Two More Drinks

The green-eyed man leaned across the rickety table toward Curt Riley, slumped in the big chair. His slim, sinewy fist clutched the butt of his six-gun, and his finger crooked around the trigger. He emphasized his words with the muzzle of his gun.

"Dennison is offerin' a thousand dollars' reward for yuh—alive! Figured yuh would head this way, an' sent me word to be on the lookout! I can use thet thousand, but a split on Andy O'Rourke's five thousand would be better! What d'yuh say?"

Curt Riley drew a sharp breath. His narrowed gaze bored into the green eyes. If it was some kind of a trick, he could not fathom the meaning of it. But he spoke slowly, weighing each word.

"Why d'yuh talk to me of a split on O'Rourke's money? Yuh know where thet went! I'm givin' yuh credit for a slick frameup but this talk don't sound like yuh're so smart. Ain't no use tryin' to make me think yuh didn't gun Andy, an' pocket the cash."

For a long minute the ruffian faced Curt Riley. His green eyes were veiled by narrowed lids, but the red-headed puncher could see the gradual change in expression steal across the narrow face, could see the cunning leer change to a look of deadly wrath.

At last he straightened, and gestured Curt Riley to his feet. "Our trip to Granite is postponed for a spell, feller! Ain't no one ever tricked Hawk Braden twice!

I'm aimin' to see thet it ain't bein' done now! Yuh're holin' up with Pancho an' Blackmer for comp'ny. I'll be back when I've attended to a little business!"

The log cabin, ten miles back in the hills, was small and mean but Curt Riley had to admit that it was as tight as a jail. Just a single door, and only one window, narrow and tightly barred. And Pancho and Blackmer were about as eager

and as hard-bitten a pair of jailers as he had ever seen.

Hawk Braden's orders were that the prisoner was not to be harmed, that he was worth nothing dead. But Curt Riley sensed that the two ruffians could stretch the meaning of the order mighty thin. He knew he was in for a plenty tough time.

For half an hour after Hawk Braden had ducked out into the night again, the two hombres said hardly a word to him. They motioned him to the bunk against the north wall, and dragged up chairs for themselves at the rickety table.

With their six-guns ready for their fists, and a squat bottle in the center of the table, they began a desultory game of head-and-head poker. With every hand, they took long drags from the bottle. And Curt Riley, watching closely, saw the cruel leer on the half-breed's face deepen.

Something was due to happen mighty quick—unless he could think of a way out. And cudgel his brains as he would, that way seemed out of reach. Then Blackmer downed the last swallow of liquor in the bottle, and tossed the empty into the corner. Pancho cursed, as the bottle crashed. Then his beady little eyes narrowed, as he shot a glance at Curt Riley.

"The liquor ees gone, Blackmer, but there ees still pleasure to be had. Stakes to play for, eh?"

"What d'yuh mean, greaser?" Blackmer asked thickly. "No more tequila, no more fun!"

"Theese red-head weel furnish the entertainment. We weel play to see who ees firs' to carve hees bran' on thees hombre's chest!"

"Huh?" Then Blackmer leaned back in his chair, his head thrown back in a drunken, bellowing laugh. "Thash right! Bran' the dumb cow-nurse!"

Curt Riley tensed, and instinctively his hand groped at this chest. He could almost feel the razor-sharp knives against his ribs. Then his eyes narrowed, for his hand had felt something. A thin smile crossed his face, as he reached into his shirt-front.

He dragged out the squat bottle that he had picked up back there beside the corrals at Granite, the bottle that he had hoped to use as evidence that he was framed.

He rose, and took a step toward the table. Pancho and Blackmer snatched up their six-guns and whirled in their chairs toward him. But he grinned widely.

"Reckon there ain't no stoppin' yuh hombres' fun—but mebbe the three-four drinks left in this bottle will help yuh do a neater job of brandin'!"

Still covering the red-head with the muzzle of his six-gun, Pancho stepped forward and took the bottle from Curt Riley's hand. He backed to the table, and dropped into his chair once more. With a puzzled look on his scarred, swarthy face, he set the bottle between Blackmer and himself.

But Blackmer snatched it up, and drew the cork with his teeth. He lifted the bottle to his lips, but Pancho ripped out

a curse. "Por Dios, we weel play for the firs' dreenk!"

Blackmer opened his mouth to roar an answer, but he must have read the anger in Pancho's eyes, for he picked up the greasy deck, and shuffled the cards. The first hand was a winner for Blackmer, and he laughed loudly, as he took a deep drag at the bottle.

A funny look swept his face, as he licked his lips. Then he shook his head, and picked up the next hand. He leaned close to study the cards, brushed his eyes with his hand, and tossed them to the table. Pancho grinned crookedly as he upended the bottle, and let it gurgle into his throat until the last drop was gone.

Curt Riley watched the pair closely, tensely. And when he saw the blank look creep into their eyes, he drew a deep, quavering breath. He rose from the bunk and stepped softly toward them. Blackmer mouthed a wordless curse, and groped for his six-gun. But as his hand grasped the butt, he collapsed across the table.

Pancho's swarthy face twisted into a deadly mask. His thick tongue could not form words, but his expression spoke volumes. He staggered to his feet, and tried to swing his six-gun up. But his flabby, drugged muscles were not equal to the task. He took a half step toward Curt Riley and toppled in a heap upon the floor.

Riley acted swiftly. He did not bother to hog-tie the two ruffians. If the liquor affected them as it had him, they would be out for a full day at least. And no matter if they did awaken sooner, he would be long gone.

He tested the six-guns, chose Pancho's as nearest the balance of his own. He buckled the half-breed's filled belt around his own middle, and strode out into the darkness. He chose a horse from the corral twenty yards behind the cabin, a long-legged, rangy bay.

In a scant five minutes he was in the saddle, and headed northeast. His destination was plain and he was certain of some of the things he would find there. He had a longer trail to take than Hawk Braden but he was sure the green-eyed man would hole up in the hills during the day. And Curt intended to ride steadily.

CHAPTER VI
Double Death

It lacked but an hour of daylight when the red-headed puncher broke from the thick timber into a broad clearing. In the gloom he could see the familiar buildings looming like huge shadows, the two-story log and stone house, the long, low horse shed, the saddle-house and, fifty yards to the right, the bunkhouse.

He swung from the saddle, and ground-anchored his horse. Slipping silently across the clearing, he halted beside the open door of the bunkhouse, where raucous snores told him that the half dozen punchers were sleeping soundly.

On tiptoe, hardly daring to breathe, he stepped into the room. It was as dark as the inside of a tar-barrel, but he made his way to the third bunk without a second's hesitation. He stopped for a moment, as he dragged his right six-gun from its holster. Then he leaned low.

The muzzle of the six-gun poked into a set of ribs, just as his left hand clamped down on a half-opened mouth. He knew, by the jerk of the long, lanky body that the man had awakened with a start. He whispered a sharp order.

"Not a word or yuh'll stop a slug! Get onto yore feet, an' grab yore boots! Yuh an' me are goin' places, an' goin' alone! Understand?"

The head beneath his hand nodded. He loosed his clutching hand and eased up on the prodding gun-barrel. Then he hissed another order.

"Yuh'll not be needin' yore guns! I'm

carryin' the smoke-poles for this party! Get to movin', pronto!"

The two, prisoner and red-headed puncher, made their way silently from the bunkhouse. They angled across to the horse-shed, and in less than a dozen minutes the lanky prisoner was in the saddle. Curt Riley led the horse, until he reached his own ground-anchored animal.

"Head for Granite!" he ordered. "An' remember, I'm behind yuh, plenty ready to drill yuh if yuh make a wrong move!"

During the rest of the dark hours, the two rode into the northeast. But as daylight came, the lanky hombre pulled up and faced Curt Riley.

"I don't know yore game, feller! But yuh'll never get away with it! Yuh'll swing, if'n the sheriff gets his hands onto yuh! Posses been combin' the hills for yuh ever since yuh hit the trail! An' this time, blast yore hide, I won't help yuh break jail!"

A twisted grin spread over Curt Riley's face. "Don't think I'm forgettin' what yuh done, Slim Murfin! But I aim to prove yuh're all wrong about me gunnin' Andy O'Rourke. If'n I'm wrong in my guess, I'll give myself up to Sheriff Grandon!"

For a long moment Slim Murfin looked at the red-headed puncher through narrowed lids. Apparently he read truth and honesty in Curt Riley's face, for he grunted wordlessly and lifted his reins.

All day they rode, keeping well off the beaten trails and holing up every time some rider was skylined. Darkness was dropping swiftly, when they topped the ridge that looked down upon Granite. Lights flickered here and there and Curt Riley knew that the brightest cluster was the Cinch Ring Saloon. He grinned crookedly, as he remembered the last time he had seen it.

Slim Murfin turned to Curt. "Where to now, hombre?"

Curt Riley handed the lanky hombre one of his six-guns. Slim thrust it in his waistband, but waited for Curt to speak. The red-head was silent a moment. And when he spoke it was as if he was voicing his thoughts aloud.

"Hawk Braden ain't ridin' into Granite in the daytime. He'd be seen an' reported. Likely somebody thet didn't care to meet up with him would bushwhack him—pronto! But he ain't waitin' long after dark! If'n my hunch is right—"

He turned to Slim Murfin. "Foller me, feller, an' pray thet I've guessed right!"

Slim Murfin nodded. "Yuh're ramroddin' the outfit an' I hope yuh know what yuh're doin'!"

The two riders edged around the little town and entered it from the east. They rode silently past the huge rickety livery stable, turned left past a half dozen scattered shacks, and headed straight for a two-story clapboard house, the only one in Granite.

Slim Murfin's eyes opened wide, as he realized their destination. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again without uttering a word.

Fifty yards from the house, Curt Riley neckreined his horse to the left into a clump of scrub juniper. He swung from the saddle, and in a moment Slim Murfin was beside him. Curt spoke softly.

"This is as far as we go until another visitor shows up! He'd ought to be gettin' here right sudden, if'n I ain't on the wrong trail!"

"I still don't savvy—" began Slim Murfin. But his words broke off short, for the soft pad of hoofs in the dusty trail reached their ears. Curt Riley, peering from the cover, saw the shadowy form of a horse and rider. He drew a long breath.

"He's here, hombre; Hawk Braden has arrived!"

The rider pulled up at the hitchrail in front of the house, and swung stiffly from his saddle. He stumped up onto the

porch. The pound of his knuckles against the door reached Curt Riley and Slim Murfin plainly. After a moment, a light flared up, sending an orange slash across the porch from the window.

Muffled words that Curt and Slim could not make out came from inside. Then a curse from the man on the porch, a crash as he kicked the door open and leaped inside.

"Let's get goin'!" Curt Riley rasped.

He and Slim Murfin raced for the dark end of the porch, stepped softly up onto it, and edged along the wall toward the door. The words of the two men came plainly, and Curt Riley's hand, dropped lightly on Slim's arm, halted the lanky hombre.

Hawk Braden was speaking, and Curt could feel Slim tense beneath his grasp.

"Yuh crooked me, Sim Dennison!" Hawk Braden snarled. "Yuh said Curt Riley took thet five thousand an' hid it. Yuh give me five hundred for framin' him instead of a split on Andy O'Rourke's money! Yuh said Curt Riley downed O'Rourke before yuh had a chance at him but it's a blasted lie! Yuh done the shootin' an' yuh've got the five thousand. I've come for it—all of it!"

Then banker Sim Dennison's frightened, pleading voice: "I—I didn't mean to hold out on yuh, Braden! I only wanted to be plumb shore Riley was dead—couldn't dig up nothin' on us—before I admitted it was me thet plugged O'Rourke! Didn't want a soul to know it, not even yuh! But I was aimin' to tell yuh, the minute Riley swung!"

"Yeah?" Braden snarled. "Then why did yuh send word yuh wanted Riley alive? Why did yuh try to make me think yuh wanted to sweat him into tellin' where he had hid the money? It wouldn't have been no chore to have downed him, down in San Pedro!"

"I—I jest wanted to see him swing—to be plumb certain—"

"Thet makes good talk but it don't hold water!" Hawk Braden snapped. "Where is thet money? I rode sixty miles after it an' I'm takin' it back with me!"

Curt Riley thought he detected a change in Dennison's voice, as the banker answered. And the red-headed rider drew his six-gun silently from its holster. He could hear Slim Murfin's teeth grinding in

rage, could feel the tremor of deadly anger in the young puncher's arm.

Then he strained his ears to catch every word of Dennison's halting statement. "Thet—thet money is in the wall safe, right over there, Braden! Jest stay put, an' I'll get it for yuh! I wasn't tryin' to crook yuh!"

Curt Riley's eyes narrowed, out there in the darkness. He took a gliding step toward the door, as Braden's rasping answer came.

"If it's there, get it pronto! I've wasted enough time on a blasted double-crosser already!"

Then the pad of bare feet across the room. Curt and Slim Murfin edged closer to the door, and now they stood just outside of the slash of light. They could hear the click, as the dial of the old wall safe turned, then the sound of the squeaking door opening.

Then Sim Dennison's words barked out sharply. "Stick 'em high, Braden! Grab for the rafters!" He laughed shortly, harshly. "Didn't know I had a six-gun layin' in the safe, huh? Wasn't lookin' for—"

Then the sound of booted feet, the crash of a body hurtled to the floor, the sullen roar of a six-gun! Curt Riley and Slim

Murfin leaped to the door, crowded through. Just inside they halted, as their eyes swept the room.

Hawk Braden lay on the floor, propped up on one elbow. The other hand held a six-gun, with a wisp of gray smoke eddying up from the muzzle. There was a twisted grin on the green-eyed man's face. Over against one wall, Sim Dennison huddled motionless, as if he had slid down the wall to a sitting position. But the round black hole in the center of his forehead was plain evidence that Sim Dennison would never pull another crooked deal.

Then Braden's grin faded, as he seemed to sense for the first time that he was not alone. Still prone on the floor, he half turned, and his green eyes lifted to Curt Riley and Slim Murfin.

"Yuh, Riley! How did yuh get here? I left yuh—"

"I gave the rest of thet Dom Pedro tequila to yore men, Braden! Seems like it worked on them, jest like it did me. By the time they wake up, yuh'll be occupyin' the cell thet used to be mine. Climb onto yore hoofs!"

Hawk Braden's green eyes narrowed, and Curt could see his trigger finger begin to tighten. Then, apparently he realized that he didn't have a chance against the two punchers. He grunted wordlessly, and turned to push himself to his feet.

He acted with swift and deadly cunning. Instead of coming erect, he hurtled his body toward the table that held the lamp, and as he moved, his gun swung toward Curt Riley. It spat flame, just as the ruffian's body struck the table legs, sent it crashing to the floor, and the room was plunged into darkness.

Then Hawk Braden was on his feet, and racing toward the window. Slim Murfin leaped to intercept him, and the outlaw's gun spoke again. But this time it was answered from near the door. The green-eyed man screamed shrilly, as the bullet drilled his chest, screamed, and pitched half through the window, his body draped across the sill.

With a muffled curse, Slim Murfin sped to the corner shelf where the second lamp stood. He snatched it down, scratched a match with shaking fingers, and touch the wick. Then he whirled, and his eyes darted to Curt Riley.

The red-headed puncher stood there on widespread legs, his left arm dangling uselessly at his side. But there was a grim smile on his face, as he holstered his right six-gun.

"Looks like the end of the chapter, Slim! Braden downed Sim Dennison an' stopped a slug himself! Yuh heard the talk, an' can witness thet I'm cleared of killin' Andy O'Rourke!"

"Yeah," Slim grunted. "An' unless Sim Dennison was even a bigger liar than I think, we'll find thet five thousand in his wall safe, jest like he said! We'll get it an' then me an' yuh are headin' to wake up Sheriff Grandon! I want to tell him a thing or two about tryin' to saddle yuh with murder."

Curt Riley grinned softly and promised himself never to mention, or even remember, that only a few hours ago even Slim Murfin believed him a murderer. After all, Slim was a pardner fit to tie to.

THE BIG WET

By

S. OMAR BARKER

That Great Big Ol' Rainstorm Made Web-Foot Willie A Hero. It Also Made Boosty Peckleberry A Bigger Liar Than Ever!

The Curly Q bunkhouse steamed with fragrance as the clean tangy scent of crackling juniper in the red hot stove mingled with the horsey pungencies of wet cowboys getting dry.

Only an experienced nostril could have catalogued the symphony of scents for what they were: the cowish smell of muddy boots, the leathery aroma of drying chaps, the ineffable perfume of soggy socks hung too near the stove, the sweetsome incense of damp Bull Durham. There was, too, the horse-sweatey musk of drying saddle blankets, the gentle aroma of scorched man-hair as Mr. Boosty Peckleberry tossed the muddy combings of his whiskers onto the blister-bellied stove, the alcoholic tang from a nearly empty jug labeled "Gut-Warmer," and, like a blue fog through it all, the fumes of fire-and-brimstone language.

"If this ain't the billy-be-damnedest country this side of hell's duck pond!" snorted Bran Mash Mullens. "First we git a three-year dry spell, to where yer ol' slicker is plumb cut through by the sad-

It was right smart of a jump, plumb over Rusty Roberts an' Wall-Eye Wufferd an' plunk into the water on the other side. Them fish, no doubt, figgered it was a high jump contest . . .

dle strings an' sun-cracked all over like a sore lip, then a cloudburst ketches yuh out on the flats that'd drowned a he-duck with an umbreller tail!"

"Yeah," growled Biff Wilkins, "my dang levi's have dyed me as blue-legged as an ol' he-heron. Damn if I ever see such a rain before."

"Shucks," put in the new hand named Lufe, rubbing the squirt from a wrung-out sock out of his eyes, "it rained down in Texas one time, 'cordin' to my uncle, to where the water rose so fast the ducks couldn't—"

"Yeah, I know," broke in Banty McGinnis, histing the jug of gut-warmer, "to where, 'cordin' to your uncle's grandpappy's eighteenth grandson by marriage, the ducks couldn't fly. Even when they tried to bat their wings off'n the water, it riz so fast they thought they was divin' instid.

" 'Course this here is a right nice little shower today, but back in Oklahoma I've saw it rain to where it was months before a mule could twitch his ear without lookin' like a street sprinkler. Don't never git no such rains as that out here in New Mexico."

"No," agreed old Boosty, padding the bunkhouse table with a pair of drawers to iron out his hosstails on. "Not any more we don't. But we usta. Did I ever tell you soggy-seats about the Big Wet we had back in the days when boys was men an' Pecos Bill a sheepherder? If you'd of went through that wet spell, Bran Mash, you wouldn't pay no mind to a little sprinkle like this."

"Sprinkle, hell! Jest listen to 'er peltin' down! Good thing this ol' bunkhouse don't leak—much!" Bran Mash cussed again as a thin sluice of water spewed from a rafter onto his bald spot.

"Lemme see." Old Boosty slid a hot flat-iron thoughtfully over a yard of his steaming hoss-tails. "If I recollect right, an' I reckon I do, seem like this Big Wet I speak of come on us right after a Big Dry which had lasted nine years, eight months, twenty-three days an' about thirteen hours an' twenty-nine minutes or a little over.

I recollect it had got so dry that all the windmills was pumpin' pure dust, to where you could locate 'em forty-odd miles off by the fog they raised. There was full growed steers on the range that hadn't had a drink of nothin' thinner than yesterday's chuck wagon gravy since they was weaned, an' what milk the cows was able to give was so dried up an' shrivelled it come out like navy beans.

I recollect the Big Auger of the Circle-O-With-a-Ring-Around-It spread where I was workin', why he bought both Monkey-Wards an' Seahorse & Sawbuck plumb out of coffee mills to rig out his calves with so's they could grind up that dry milk fit to swaller. Otherwise them hard little ol' milk beans would jest rattle around inside of 'em till it wore their livers right down to the core.

The cattle was kinder wild them days, an' hard to come up to, but you could tell if a calf had lost the coffee mill off'n his muzzle a good quarter-mile away, because if he had you could hear them milk marbles rattlin' aginst his ribs when he run. Then you'd have to ketch him an' screw a new grinder on him.

What say? How'd them calves turn them coffee grinders an' suck at the same time? Well, I never said they did. Them grinders was equipped with a drive wheel that reached the ground on the calf's south side. First he'd suck the mill full of them milk beans, then he'd start to run an' play like calves always does after suckin', an', o' course, his runnin' turnt the wheel an' ground his milk for him. Shore was a purty sight to see a bunch of them little ol' calves out rollin' their hoops.

If there'd come such a drouth nowadays the ranchers wouldn't hardly save a calf,

because I notice you moderun shorthorns git plumb rebellious everwhen you have to ride more'n the usual sixteen hours a day, whilst endurin' that Big Dry we was in the saddle up to twenty-six an' seven hours a day, ridin' around with our oil cans, keepin' them calves' grinders lubercated to where the gears wouldn't clog up with the dust.

I been readin' lately how all them Brain Busters back in Washington, D. C., is havin' night sweats about the dust storms, but compared to the Big Dry I'm speakin' of these here moderun dusters ain't no more'n a jassack would kick up stompin' at a little red dog. I seen dust storms them days so thick that a man'd have to hire a well-driller to bore him out a place to spit.

But I was aimin' to relate you about this here Big Wet that followed the Big Dry. I don't know how we'd ever of brung the stock through it without a big ol' die-up if it hadn't of been for Web-Foot Willie. He was one of these here Brethren of the Bawth, which I mean he was half English on his pappy's side, half English on his mammy's side, an' half wit on all sides.

Seem like his fambly had sent him over to rawnch in America not so much to git rid of him as his company. Jest one of the simple scions of a high falutin' fambly that disgraced 'em by stirrin' his tea right-handled or somethin', so they permoted him to be a Remittance Man an' he come west, where his main object in life was to take a bawth.

Imagine that in a country where many a venerable ol' frog croaks in sorrow to the grave thinkin' water is jest some funny stuff humans keeps in buckits. But Willie had done bawthed so much in his boyhood that he had web feet. His bib-an'-tucker name was Albert Henry Herbit William Wilfrith Willinghambottomsly, pernounced Wumsly, P. K. Boo of Upson Downs, England, but we called him Web-Foot Willie for short. Shore, you've heard of him! He's the feller that drowned the duck!

I recollect ridin' in one day endurin' the Big Dry to find ol' Web-Foot Willie takin' him a bawth in the hoss trough.

"What the noodlems you think you're doin'?" I says. "Doin' the hosses a flavor?"

"Cheery ho!" he says. "Just splawshin' about a bit! Join me, what?"

But I told him I'd plumb *unjoin* him if I ever ketched him wallerin' in that trough agin, wastin' the water when it was already so skeerce we'd hired a little boy to come runnin' ever' time we watered a hoss to ketch his slobbers an' strain 'em back into the trough.

Well, Willie was too smart to git caught agin. Next evenin' when I come in, though, the water was a little warmer than usual, so I knowed he'd been bawthin' agin. So I opened up the book an' read him all about hellfire on' how come it, if he bawthed in that trough any more. Well, sir, I rode in early the next evenin' an' there was ol' Willie hunkered-down by the hoss trough, blowin' on the water to cool it.

I don't know how we'd ever of kept him outa that hoss trough if it hadn't let in to rain. Jest a little ol' sprinkle at first, 'bout like this 'un here today, but it was the beginnin' of the Big Wet.

The ground was so dry that for the first four days them raindrops jest bounced an' rolled around in the dust without wettin' anything. The boys would squat around of evenin's an' play marbles with 'em.

First real hint we got that it shore 'nough aimed to wet things down, was the seventh day when we missed Web-Foot Willie. Found him settin' beside an ol' dry tank with a big pile of them dust-covered raindrops piled up beside him. He had a bristly ol' wild hawg by the ears, an' tied onto his tail, the hawg's I mean, was a porkypine.

What Willie was doin', he was rollin'

them raindrops down the hawg's back, an' ever' time he rolled one, he'd twist the ol' pig's ears to where his bristles would raise an' bresh the dust off'n them rollin' raindrops, an' when they'd roll off'n the pig's back they'd bounce onto that ol' porky's, which with the dust coat kinder removed, the quills would puncture 'em an' the water would run on down into the tank. In another ten hours, Willie claimed, if we hadn't come along an' stopped him, he'd of had enough in the tank for a bawth.

"Bawth, me Awnt Trixie!" snorts one of the boys called Rusty Roberts. "How you ever expect to become a cowboy if you keep washin' off the flavor thataway? Don't you know that ol' sayin': 'Save the surface an' you save all?' "

So we run him home without a bawth.

'Bout the tenth day of the sprinkle the Old Man rides in an' says:

"Boys, I'm mighty feered this here'll make a rain yit. Ol' Pecos Bill has lost his sheep, an'—"

"Haw!" butts in Willie. "Shawly you mean Little Bo Peep, what?"

"Never mind, Bo," I tells him, sourcastic, "one more Peep outa you an' I know one limey lambkin that'll be leaving alone to vamoose back home, with my ol' lass rope whacking his tail behind him! What about Pecos Bill's dang sheep, Boss?"

"Well," says the Old Man, "you know how ol' Pecos has been lettin' them sheep play around in them mirage lakes that's always shimmerin' on the flats. Well, this time seem like it wasn't no mirage they hit, but the Big Dusty River plumb bankfull of genuine juicy water, to where them sheep busted through the layer of dust on top of it, an' either they drownded or growed gills an' turned to fish, fer they never come out."

"That's funny," I says. "Sheep's supposened to float, with all that wool on 'em."

"Bulls is supposened to switch their tails, too," grunts the Old Man, "but you never see a bob-tailed 'un doin' very good at it. Boys, them sheep was fresh sheared, an' the hell of it is, you know all them bottomless sink-holes in Dish Pan Valley—why, ol' Pecos has jammed that wool in 'em plumb to the brim. Claims he's makin' nests for his elephants to lay their eggs in, come layin' season."

"Silly awss!' interjecticulates Web-Foot Willie. "Helephants don't lay heggs!"

"No," growls the Old Man, "but the next feller to interrupt me is li'ble to. As far as that goes, Pecos Bill ain't got no elephants anyways, but the facks remain that he's plugged up them bottomless holes to where the water cain't dreen off of our range, an' if it should let in to rain we'll either be punchin' cows in rowboats around here or else git us some web-footed hosses! An' it does look right smart rainy!"

Gents, that night it let in to rain like a herd of ol' bull whales on the blow, an' the next mornin' we went out to a corral full of mighty short legged hosses. Bogged halfway to their knees. No more use tryin' to work cattle a day like that than for a hare-lipped hombre to whistle, so we all holed up in the bunkhouse an' let in to thumb the wish-book. All but Web-Foot Willie. We could hear him splawshin' about out in the hoss trough all mornin' an' not even the hosses to say him neigh.

I want to tell you country cowhands that there was a Big Wet from who squoze the squirt gun. You take a critter that'd reach down for a mouthful of grass, it was jest as li'ble to bite a drownded fish instid.

If a man took the notion to look up at the clouds to see if the storm showed any signs of breakin', he'd have to clamp a clothespin on his snoot an' wire his mouth shet or he'd fill up with water to where if you thumped him he'd plunk like a ripe

watermelon. That's how hard it was rainin'.

Within three days ever' fence post in the country had frum one to sixty horny toads settin' on top of it to keep frum drowndin', an' within a week they'd all done shed their warts an' went to croakin' like bullfrogs. We could hear the cattle bawlin' as they swum around, divin' ever' now an' then to look fer lost calves.

Might not of been so bad if all them sinkholes hadn't been stopped up to where the water couldn't dreen off no place, an' as a consemaquince, jest kep' backin' up, deeper an' deeper, over mighty nigh all of the Circle-O-With-a-Ring-Around-It Range.

First job we had on our hands was to figger some way to git all them milk mills off'n the calves before them drive-wheels would bog down some place an' drownd 'em. Believe it or swaller a windmill, we set around on the top bunks of the bunkhouse soakin' our toenails for five days, sweatin' our noodles over the problim of unwheelin' them calves before we could come to no conclusion.

Meanwhile about ever' ten minutes we'd hear a "pip-pip, me lads!" an' a splash. It was Web-Foot Willie divin' off'n the top rail of the corral to git down to the hoss trough for his bawth, happy as a flea in a doghouse.

Gents, when we finally got all the jugs empty an' lit out to see what we could do for them pore water-logged cattle, you wouldn't hardly believe the difficulties we run into. I don't know where all them catfish come frum unless them shorn sheep of ol' Pecos Bill's had turned into fish instid of drownding when they sunk. But be that as it maybe wasn't, as we rode range that day the hosses couldn't hardly swim for bumpin' into catfish, an' first thing we knowed they was about to pull us under.

Now a catfish is a sweet-tempered soul, an' don't mean no harm to nobody, but they jest ain't got no judgment. The next thing we knowed several thousand kitten-fish was swingin' onto our hosses' tails fer the ride.

It wasn't so bad as long as our ponies jest had to tow 'em along like tandem bobsleds, but when they got all strung out, each one a-holt of the next 'un's tail an' the front one onto the hoss's, they began to play crack-the-whip, an' it was kinder bad. You take over eight hunderd catfish crackin' one whip, an' they'll jerk a swimmin' hoss to where it'll pop his eyes out.

They'd jest give mine a yank that stretched his neck to where it taken a forty-foot lass rope for me to ketch him agin, though I was still on his back, when an ol' whale riz to blow right amongst us. Only it wasn't no whale after all. It was Web-Foot Willie!

"Jolly, what?" he chortles.

Jolly, my glass eye! For believe it or straddle a string, it was Web-Foot Willie swimmin' under the water that had got them kitten-fish started hangin' onto our hosses' tails in the first place, an' also learnt 'em to crack the whip.

"Web-Foot," I says, placin' four .45 bullets in a small square right around him, "I reelize fun is fun, but if you don't want a coupla holes in you where they'll let in the most water, you dive under agin right now an' git them kitten-fish loose from our hosses before they pull us under!"

Did I tell you before that Web-Foot Willie's love for the water was mainly external? Gallons for the bawth, but not one drop to drink! So the prospects of me lettin' a leak into him shore brung him to time.

Without even a "pip-pip, me lads" he dove under an' got to work. An' as quick as he yanked them catfish loose he handed us up the ends of our hosses' tails,

which we hung onto to 'em plenty solid. The idee, o' course, was to keep them kitten-fish frum grabbin' 'em agin, but as it turnt out, that was all that kept them pore tired ponies afloat. By pullin' up on their tails with one hand an' liftin' on the bridle reins with the other we managed to hold 'em up high enough in the water to where we could continue the circle after them water-logged cattle.

Main thing was to see about them calves. Well, as it turnt out them coffee grinder wheels on the calves hadn't give 'em no trouble to speak about, mainly because of them smart catfish. What them thorn-whiskered underwater wizards had done, they'd paired them calves up, wheel sides towards each other, pulled up fence posts to stick between each pair of wheels fer axles, an' was jest havin' 'em one hell of a time chariot racin' them dogies.

Left to theirselves them calves would of hit mushy spots an' bogged shore, but them catfish charioteers had kept 'em to the gravel beds where they could race 'em faster, an' we didn't find nary a calf bogged down nowheres. Nor drownded. Seem like them coffee mills on their muzzles kept the water pumped out of 'em as fast as they swallered it.

But it looked like we was due to lose ever' damn head of 'em anyways. Yessir, frum pure starvation. Their mammie was hangin' around all right, but the calves wasn't gittin' no milk. What say? No, it wasn't account of them coffee grinders. Well, I'll tell you: you know how a cat critter loves warm milk? 'Course all them cows' udders was under the water by then.

What say? No, them catfish wasn't suckin' 'em, because ever' time they tried it their darnin'-needle whiskers would prickle the cow an' she would kick the hell out of them. So what they'd done, they'd rounded up a bunch of carp—you know, suckers—an' they had them suckers suckin' the milk for 'em, then they would swaller the suckers, squeeze the juice out of 'em an' spit out the pulp, same as a tenderfoot does stewed prunes.

In fact we seen right away that it was them milk-filled suckers that them charioteer catfish had up for prizes in their two-calf cart races. A big ol' gray bellied channel cat had just drove a couple of our best line-backed heifer calves to a thrillin' finish to cop the purse in the quarter dash when we come up, an' was startin' to herd his 50 milk-bearin' suckers out into the deeps to put the squeeze on 'em, proud as a little white dog with a red tail.

"Boys," says the Old Man, treadin' water to kinder rest his hoss, "this here may be the Fourth of July to the catfish, but it's Labor Day fer us, because if we don't bust up this here catfish rodeo an' bust it up quick, there won't be enough calves left to hair-stink a brandin' iron by the time this here Big Wet is over! So if ary wahoo amongst you has got any idee to suggest how we're gonna do it, let him unlimber his lolliger now or forever hold his pieces."

"Well," offers Rusty Robert, pullin' his head up outa the water frum watchin' them catfish charioteers line up for the next race, "all I got to say is that if a feller had a pole an' a hook an' line an' some sowbelly for bait an' a dry place to set, this'd be a mighty likely time to ketch up on his fishin'."

"Yes," I says, "an' if my ol' aunt Yoofeemy had of had wheels she'd of been a bicycle! Boys, them catfish acts suspiciously like sheep to me, jest transmografied into fish by the hydrofolus catalootic effects of too much water.

"Lookit how whatever one of 'em does, they all follers suit, same as a bunch of damn woolies. All we got to do, we got to git one of 'em started doin' somethin' else besides runnin' the rumps off'n them calves, an' they'll all go to doin' it an'—"

"Fine!" growls the Old Man, sourcastic. "You might speak to 'em about it, Boosty.

Somehow I cain't seem to recall the catfish language myownself."

"Funny you don't," I growls back, "lookin' as much like one as you do, except maybe a little too narrow at the head an' broad at the tail!"

Well, it was a good idee, but none of us could figger any way to work it. So we jest about decided to send a messenger to ol' President Andy Jackson requestin' the loan of some of them half-alligator submarines out of his army, when wup an' be wonderful, thar she blows! Web-Foot Willie, it was, arrivin' like one of these here underwater skoozit birds that lives on chili-beans an' swims backwards to enjoy the wind.

"Ahoy the bridge!" he hails the Old Man, comin' up to blow. "What watch is this?"

"It's watch out!" snorts the Old Man. "An' where the hell is any bridge?"

So Willie explains that this is jest a nautical way of politely askin' the time, as he fears it's nearin' the hour for him to return to the hoss trough fer his awfternoon bawth.

"Bawth be damned!" I says. "Swim under yonder an' bust up this catfish rodeo before—"

Well, I don't git to finish them powders, because right then an ol' catfish comes swimmin' by with a bouquet of cactus to persent to the catfish queen of the rodeo, and he accimadently breshes a barnacle off'n ol' Willie's stern with it, an' Willie shoots up outa the water like there was a Heely Monster in his pants if he'd had any on. Yessir, it was right smart of a jump, plumb over Rusty Robert an' Wall-Eye Wufferd an' plunk into the water on the other side.

An' he hadn't hardly hit when *swoosh!* Here leaps an ol' catfish right after him.

An' then another 'un, an' another 'un. Why, before you could say Mr. John H. Robinson, Esquire, the air was plumb full of leapin' catfish. No, they wasn't chasin' ol' Willie. Why, when the ol' whiskerino with the cactus bouquet seen Web-Foot leap thataway, the sheep strain in him natcherly asserted itself, an' he throwed down the bouquet an' done likewise.

The rest of them fish no doubt figgered it was a high jump contest startin' up, so they plumb forgot chariot racin' an' jined the jumpin'. Same way you notice when one sheep takes him a jump comin' out of the pen, so does all the others, even though there ain't nothin' to jump over.

By noon the next day we finished unscrewin' the last Circle-O-With-a-Ring-Around-It calf frum his coffee mill an' had 'em all branded an' restored to their mammies. How'd we git a fire to brand 'em if it was so wet? I never said we hot ironed 'em. Wasn't no need. Why, chariot racin' with them fish, them coffee grinder wheels had kinder rubbed 'em, makin' a perfect Circle-O-With-a-Ring-Around-It on the left side of ever' dang one of them calves.

What say? Why, gittin' the grinders off of 'em was simple enough, 'long as we had Web-Foot Willie on the job. You know how a mullet-head sucker will bite on anything that's offered him, same as Lufe, here.

Web-Foot jest choused them suckers around till they taken holt of the nuts holdin' them wheels on, then he'd give their tails a twist an' unscrew the nut. Our only trouble was keepin' Web-Foot on the job, as he kep' complainin' it was time for him to be gittin' back to the hoss trough fer his bawth.

Them catfish? By the jumpin' juices of jaundiced June bugs, have I got to explain ever' little deetail? Well, we jest set on our hosses, an' ever time a catfish lep' in the air one of us would smack a loop on him, snub him up to the horn, spit in his face an' drownd him.

No, it hadn't quit rainin'. The stock was doin' fairly well, howsomever, the cattle

havin' growed web feet to where they swum right easy, an' us havin' rigged sidewheel paddles to our hosses an' hammered their tail bones out flat fer rudders to guide them by.

But the cows got to givin' mighty watery milk to where the calves wasn't growin' to do no good, specially havin' to dive under an' hold their breath while they sucked; an' the growed cattle was swallerin' so much water with their undersea grazin' that it become plain it was only a matter of time till the belly hide would give way an' bust 'em wide open.

It was Web-Foot Willie's love for the bawth that saved the day agin. Seem like he got kinder tired of jest the plain ol' tub bawth in the hoss trough, specially as he had to dive so deep now to git down to it, an' he hankered fer a shower bawth fer variety.

'Course the natcheral rain would of satisfied most folks, but Web-Foot Willie wanted it so he could turn it on an' off jest as he liked. What he done, he taken him a pair of hoof clippers an' swum out to the cattle, an' he clipped off the tips of them long horns of theirs stickin' up above the water. Gents, you never see a finer lot of fountains in your life.

Seem like the pressure of the surplus water in them cattle was considable, to where it spouted right out as quick as he clipped off the horn tips. An' when the pressure begun to git low to where they didn't spout to suit him, Web-Foot Willie swiped the coosie's extry case of dried prunes, taken 'em out an' screwed 'em on them horns fer stoppers till the pressure would git up agin. Only trouble was some of 'em spouted off so far an' at such a slant that it like to wore Web-Foot out swimmin' to where they come down for his shower bath.

Then, jest when we'd begun to git reconciliated to the idee of finally growin' webfooted our ownselves, the rain stopped. Not that our Dish Pan range dried up by no means. Like I said, them dreen holes was all plugged up with wool an' the water jest stood where it fell. Natcherly, when the rains quit, all them cattle usin' it, not to mention them several thousand dead catfish, it begun to git kinder whiffy on the lee side.

"Boys," says the Old Man finally, "we got to dry up that water or strain it or boil the green stink out of it or somethin', or else my nose is goin' to curl up to where it'll be crawlin' down the back o' my neck."

"Mister Boss," I says, "if your nose threatens to git into any harder shape to look at than it already is, we shore got to take means to pervent it. But I warn you, if we dreen the range, we're goin' to have one hell of a time with web-footed cattle tryin' to git around on dry land agin!"

He wouldn't be warned, but none of us could figger out anything to do about it. Well, believe it or drownd a duck, it was Web-Foot Willie's bawthin' idees agin that solved the problim. Seem like he'd finally got tired of cold bawths an' hankered to take 'em hot. So he swiped a box of matches frum the coosie, dove down to them wool-plugged sink-holes, scratched in to where the wool was still dry an' set it afire.

What he figgered, no doubt, was that the burnin' wool would heat up the whole Dish Pan basin of water plumb to the boilin' point, an' it did. But what he hadn't figgered on was the cold spell that hit us whilst he was scratchin' around in that wool, settin' it afire. Well, results was, when Web-Foot Willie got them fires goin' good an' started to swim out he couldn't git out.

Nossir, that ol' norther had done froze the ice solid a foot thick all over the whole damn valley. An' not only was pore Web-Foot caught under it, about to bust from holdin' his breath. but the cattle was trapped in it, too.

Fortunately they'd all throwed up their heads to sniff when they smelt that norther comin', so the ice had froze with their heads above it. So they wasn't smotherin', but they was mighty likely to starve. Would of starved, but the greenish water sprayin up frum their horns froze in the shape of green willer bushes. So we got on our skates an' went an' chopped 'em down, an' nice an' green an' crisp like it was, the cattle et that frozen forage like it was good alfalfa.

So we kinder had things lookin' purty fair agin when it happened. That burnin' wool het up the water mighty fast, an' with that ice holdin' the steam under, it got up such a pressure that somethin' had to bust.

Yessir, gents, the steam plumb blowed up that whole dang basin, cattle an' all, like a bloated bull punctured on a cactus. It throwed cattle an' ice all over the dang country for five hunderd miles around. So many of them steers fell in Kansas City that they knocked the bottom plumb outa the frozen beef market, what with all that free ice that fell with 'em.

Did we ever round 'em up? Why, 'bout half of 'em, I reckon, though it taken us a right smart while to drift 'em back to the home range with their feet sore like they was from walkin' in all that cracked ice.

But it's a mighty stinky wind that don't smell good to somebody, as the feller says; because that sharp ice was what cut all the duck-webs frum betwixt their toes, so that they made theirselves right to home on dry range agin.

Shore it was dry! What water the explosion of that steam didn't blow plumb outa the country, why the wool burnt outa them sinkholes to where it could dreen away.

In fack I reckon some o' that ol' wool is smoulderin' somewheres plumb till yit, else how come the hot water seepin' out over at Ojo Caliente an' all them other New Mexico hot springs where the dudes goes to boil out their chair-rump rheumatiz?

Yessir, gents, that there was a Big Wet frum who squoze the squirt. You take a little ol' two-bit sprinkle like this here 'un tonight, why, what say? Who? Oh, Web-Foot Willie? Last I heard he was the Honorable Albert Henry Herbit William Wilfrith Willinghambottomsly, Lord High Drownder of the Ducks an' Saturday Knight of the Bawth, Suds Master of Wettingham Manner, England.

How come him to go back? Well, that steam-under-ice explosion throwed him so far he hit against Pike's Peak, bounced back an' dropped right smack in the ol' Circle-O-With-a-Ring-Around-It hoss trough. Hit so sudden he splashed it plumb empty. Shore made him wrothy. Crawled out an' said he'd be blawsted if he'd stay any longer in a country so short of water that a man couldn't even find nowheres to take a bloomin' bawth!

LOBO LEGACY

By KENNETH SINCLAIR

Though He Was Seared By The Bitter Memories Of The Injustices From Which He Had Suffered, Milt Moran Rode Grimly Into That Flaming Hell To Save His Friend From The Blood-Lusty Mob—And Also To Have A Hand In The Remaking Of A Man . . .

The Lobo drew his six-guns and rode straight into the mob.

It comes to every man, sometime during his life—this urge to return to the spot which is his home. To grip the hand of the friend of yesterday, to ride slowly over familiar range, to stretch on the grass at the edge of the old creek, and to drink long and deeply of the cooling waters.

But for Milt Moran, return to Thunder Pass only meant death. . . .

He came riding, just the same—a gaunt, grim, watchful lobo, returning to the town which had sent him first to prison, then to the lonely campfires of the owl-hoot trail.

A crimson glow, seen dimly in the night,

drew the attention of his bitter, smoky eyes. Poised in his expensive saddle, he stared from beneath the brim of his sombrero at the dull red spot in the distance. His lips wrenched into a sudden grimace, and he spurred his horse straight toward the light.

Ranch buildings were burning, over there. Across the night-shrouded range came the ugly clatter of gunfire. He knew those burning buildings were on the Circle W ranch, which belonged to his friend, Rance Weber.

Moran rode swiftly, yet the pace seemed painfully slow. This thing which was happening confirmed the hunch that had been lurking in the back of his brain —something had called him here.

At first, he had put it down merely to loneliness. He had crouched alone beside too many smoky campfires on the owl-hoot trail. He had lived as a lobo wolf lives, an outcast ever alert for danger. And he had learned more and more to rely upon those instincts which are part of the lobo's makeup.

When he hit the circle of ugly radiance which was flung out by the fire, men were dragging Rance Weber from the burning ranch house. Shouting men, their faces inflamed by liquor and by the spirit of the mob, were shaking out a hang-rope. Plainly, they had fired the building in order to smoke Weber out, and the plan had worked.

The Lobo drew his six-guns, pulled back hammers with calloused thumbs, and rode straight into the mob. His presence, in the milling excitement, was not even noticed. His well trained horse smashed aside those who got in the way, rammed into the group which pinioned the violently struggling Rance Weber.

Yells of pain, of protesting surprise, rose above the roar of the burning buildings. Men clawed for guns. But the Lobo was quick and the members of the mob still thought he was just an over-zealous hombre of their own outfit. Moran reached down, yanked Rance Weber from his captors, hoisted him up and spurred the horse.

The mob, realizing at last what was happening, tried to stop Moran, but at that moment a small bent individual let out a terrified shout.

"Hell boys, it's Moran! *Milt Moran!*"

The name struck a chill terror into the mob, and for an instant, it seemed as though the lynchers were paralyzed. For a brief instant they hesitated, then sprang into action.

Their faces like ugly masks of rage in the scarlet light cast by the fire, they plunged forward, tried to seize the horse's bridle. But Moran rode them down. Guns spurted flame, thundered, about the two men on the horse. But the mob was a milling, jostling mass, in which no one could aim accurately, and the bullets howled past the head of the Lobo. He finally fought his way clear and went pounding away into the night with only an occasional slug wailing past him.

Pursuit would be slow in starting. Back there in the circle of the fire's radiance, men were milling and cursing, each trying to get to his horse ahead of the next man.

Moran's mount was gasping under the double load. The Lobo twisted in the saddle, peered into his friend's face.

The change in Rance Weber was not pleasant. Moran remembered his old sidekick as a man with the smile and the spirit of a boy. Now the smile was a mere shadow and the spirit of the man was a pitiful, broken thing. Rance Weber's eyes were haunted by smashed hopes.

"Milt," Weber said, brokenly, like a man in a dream.

"Rance, what's happened?" Moran demanded.

"Plenty! Judy an' I were gettin' the spread goin' fine. Then—" Weber made

a bitter grimace, "Dalivar moved in on Thunder Pass."

"Dalivar?"

"Yeah. Range-hog. Gobbled ranches right an' left, mainly through mortgages an' gamblin' debts that he bought up. Needed the Circle W, for his range-hoggin' schemes. Tried to buy me out for a song and I turned his offer down. Then he tried to scare me. I told him where to head for. So then he figured to drive me out, by spreadin' talk that I was rustlin'. He sent this mob—"

Moran felt a surge of sudden anger. Weber was his friend. Judy, now Weber's wife, was the girl whom Moran had loved, back in those days when he had not yet been changed by injustice, prison, and vengeance into a grim, killing machine.

It was not by choice that Milt Moran rode the owl-hoot—he was no rustler, no road-agent, no terrorizer of the weak or defenceless. He had been forced to defend himself, that fatal night when he had killed a man. That was all, but from that time he had gone forth and farther along that trail from which no man can turn.

Then came times when he hired out his gun. But only to the side which he figured was in the right. By fighting thus, against crooked and corrupt law, by straightening out affairs where no one else could do the job, he had earned the name of the "Lobo Lawman."

And now that Dalivar had ruined Rance Weber, what was ahead for Judy?

"Where is she, Rance?" demanded the Lobo.

Weber knew whom Moran meant. "In town," he answered. "I sent her to stay with Ma Patterson when things got to lookin' bad."

Moran nodded, grimly, and touched spurs to his fagged horse. He was surprised to find that the thought of Judy and Rance, with their backs to the wall as they were, aroused within him a storm of anger and concern, as well as other emotions which he had thought long dead.

Looking back he saw the pursuers like a black and ominous wave, sweeping over the moonlit range. They were some distance away, however, and Moran had enough of a lead to bring him into Thunder Pass safely.

Thunder Pass. A bleached-out little mountain cowtown, burned by the merciless sun and scarred by the human conflicts which had rocked it. Yet beneath its drab surface there pulsed tenacious life.

The Lobo and the town had much in common, somehow, and Moran felt a surge of bitter memories as he rode down the street and stopped in front of Ma Patterson's shack. Beds of nasturtiums, behind the wobbly picket fence, sent out a fragrance strange to him.

Weber flung himself to the ground. "We'll get Judy, an' ride out of this damn' country—"

The door of the shack was flung open, and a little gray-haired lady rushed out into the chill, merciless dawn.

"Rance! Dalivar came, broke into my house, took Judy away!"

Her statement settled slowly upon Rance Weber, like a crushing weight. Milt Moran, straight and watchful in his saddle, saw his friend slump. Weber turned back to Moran.

"Licked," he said dully. "Milt, what can we do?"

Ma Patterson squinted keenly at the Lobo, wrapped her hands quickly in her apron, and went back into the house.

A faint grimace came to Moran's lips. As a kid, he had pestered Ma Patterson for fudge and for cookies. But now he was the Lobo. Feared, hated — the man who rode alone.

Moran looked at his friend. It was not pleasant, this sight of a broken man. But Moran was in a position to under-

stand Rance Weber, for the Lobo, himself, had been broken once. . . .

"How about the law, Rance?" Moran demanded. "I saw Lippy Krune, in the mob at your ranch. He still packs star, I noticed."

Weber cursed, in an unsteady voice. The man was near the breaking-point. "That damn' pot-bellied little louse!" he said shakily. "Dalivar sent him there, just to make that mob legal! Lippy's been Dalivar's pup dog, since—"

"Steady!" Moran was studying the situation. The conclusion was obvious. Here, in Thunder Pass, the law was sold out to Dalivar. This was a job for the harsh Lobo Law for which Milt Moran was famed. But in taking a hand here, Moran would be forcing himself still farther along the outlaw trail.

That didn't matter. But, besides the task of smashing Dalivar's evil power, Moran had the job of putting Rance Weber back on his feet—for Judy, the woman Moran loved. That was likely to be the toughest part of the whole setup. The rebuilding of a man is not an easy thing.

Moran dismounted, and, leading his horse, stalked along the street with Weber at his side. Dawn was creeping over the little village, and Dalivar's mob was thundering into the town.

"Dalivar wasn't in the party at the Circle W?" Moran asked.

"No. He ain't the sort to mix in any danger," Weber said bitterly. "All he done was spread talk that I was rustlin', an' buy drinks for the boys, an' that was plenty!"

"Dalivar is playing safe, holding Judy as a club over your head in case you happened to get away from the hang mob. Where would he be likely to take her?"

"He's got a house on Gallows Hill. But he's got gunhawk guards—"

"Downright prudent sort of a gent, this Dalivar. I'd admire to meet up with him," said Moran ominously.

The door of the Thunder Pass hotel swung suddenly open and a pompous little fat man came trotting out onto the porch, attracted by the noise of the oncoming mob.

"Dalivar!" Rance Weber ground out. "Give me a gun, Milt! The mob will finish me, but I'm goin' to—"

Milt Moran, moving with the quick, lithe surety upon which the Lobo's life often depends, blocked his friend's rush, mounted the hotel porch, confronted Dalivar.

Dalivar had more Mex blood than he needed, that was plain. His skin was dark, his eyes were expressionless blobs of black which lurked behind thick-lensed spectacles.

"I'm Moran," the Lobo said.

"Moran, eh?" Dalivar's manner carried a dark politeness. "I've heard of you. Friend of Weber's? Then you'd better get him out of here. There's been talk about rustling and there's likely to be a hanging when that mob gets hold of Weber." Dalivar spoke without a trace of accent and he preserved an aloof politeness.

Milt Moran looked right through the greaser. Then, abruptly, he crowded Dalivar off the porch. Moran's eyes swung to the close-packed bunch of riders led by Lippy Krune, who were coming down the street.

A queer tension thrummed in Thunder River. It snapped when Dalivar, stung to the core by Moran's action, let out a sharp little cry of fury and drew a hideout gun.

Moran, with the lobo's keen sense of danger, whirled, firing one shot as he did so. The slug drove Dalivar's gun-arm far back. He let out a frightened scream of pain, wagged the suddenly bloody arm, and twisted his head to stare uncomprehendingly at his little hideout gun as it plopped into the dust.

Moran wheeled, in the midst of a little cloud of gunsmoke, and saw that the shot had galvanized the mob into action. Jostling the pop-eyed little Lippy Krune, the riders were spurring forward, yelling, shooting.

Moran dragged Rance Weber into the hotel lobby, so quickly that the mob's first shots missed them entirely.

A battering blast of lead smashed the hotel windows, sent splinters of wood showering to the worn carpet. A bald-headed clerk grabbed the register and ran.

Swiftly, Moran surveyed the lobby of the hotel. It was exactly as of old, a shabby little world where several rickety rocking chairs sat in empty council around a big brass spittoon. The fronds of a discouraged palm, which grew in an old bucket, jerked and rustled as a bullet laced through them. One frond spun slowly down to the carpet.

Moran led Weber up the creaking stairs, along the second-floor hallway. The doors were mostly unlocked and he picked a room which fronted the street. Inside the room, he stalked to a window, poked his gun through the glass, and drowned out the sound of the tinkling fragments with the eager thunder of his weapon.

The riders outside, caught in the awkward moment of dismounting, jerked with surprise, flung startled, fearful glances up toward the hotel windows, and scattered for cover. They had been about to rush the lobby doors, but this lead which reached down for them from above carried more than ordinary menace.

One man got his foot caught in the stirrup and, when the gunfire spooked his horse and the animal bolted, was dragged through the dust. Finally the foot came free and the man was left on his back in the middle of the street, kicking like an overturned beetle.

Lippy Krune, the pudgy little sheriff, clawed uncertainly for his guns, looked desperately about seeking for some means of escape. Like most of this bunch of riders, Krune knew Milt Moran of old, and feared this grim wraith of the lobo trails who had swooped down, once again, upon Thunder Pass.

Krune, blind with fear, slammed a couple of shots in the general direction of the hotel, and went scuttling for cover. Moran watched the sheriff go, but did not fire a shot. Lippy Krune, he was reflecting, was the type of man who lives long—and uselessly. A man empty of ideals, lacking in loyalties. A man who clambered eagerly onto the bandwagon of the Powerful. And Dalivar was the Powerful, just at present, in Thunder Pass.

A man could pity Lippy Krune. . . .

The crowd melted swiftly away, leaving their horses milling and snorting with terror. Leaving, too, a couple of men twisting in the dust.

The fight, now that the first blaze of it was over, settled down to a deliberate business of killing. Lippy Krune went legging down the street, yelling to Dalivar, but the other members of the mob clambered to the roofs of the buildings on the far side of the street, leveled rifles across the tops of the false-fronts, concentrated a murderous, smashing torrent of gunfire upon the windows of the room where Moran and Weber crouched.

Moran thrust one of his guns toward the slumped, unseeing Rance Weber. The cowman took hold of the weapon listlessly, and crouched there, looking down at it.

"What's the use" Weber said, dully. "We haven't got the chance of a snowball in hell. Might as well—"

Moran, turning toward the door of the room, halted in his tracks, stared at his friend.

"That thing down there," Moran stated, "is a mob, whether it has the sanction of Lippy Krune's brand of law or not. Dalivar, though he keeps himself hid, is the master mind. Without him to give orders,

the mob will mill around like a bunch of spooked dogies, do nothing at all. Now you keep them busy out in front. I'm going to the back of this building, to scare away any gents who might to take a notion to get in that way. We'll figure us a way out of this, Rance, and we'll get Dalivar."

Weber shrugged hopelessly as Moran went out into the hallway. Here, the sound of the gunfire outside was muffled and unreal. But Moran was thinking about Weber. Rance was the real goods, but he had been smashed by something stronger than himself. And the rebuilding of a man, sometimes, is a tough proposition.

The Lobo shook his head gently as he stalked along the hallway. Suddenly, at the head of the stairs, he crouched.

Lippy Krune was coming gingerly up the stairs, lifting his feet like a cat walking through wet grass. The lawman's holsters were empty, his hands were at shoulder level, and his head was swiveling around. His puffy cheeks and wide, frightened eyes gave him the look of a startled gopher.

"Well?" Milt Moran challenged.

"Milt—c'n I talk to you?" Krune pleaded.

"Nothing stopping you, Lippy. What did Dalivar tell you to say?"

That put Krune back on his heels. He took a swipe at his straggly mustache and haltingly plunged into his palaver.

"Milt, Dalivar's got Judy. He'll kill her, certain sure, unless Rance Weber knuckles under. Neither you nor anybody else c'n buck Dalivar—he's too strong, too almighty smart. Now, look at the thing thisaway, Milt, Dalivar's out to finish Weber, plumb an' complete. Nothin' else will suit Dalivar, after the way Weber had bucked him an' raised particular hell. An' everybody knows that you loved Judy, before you was sent to prison. Well, hell, ain't the setup plain?" Krune took another swipe at his mustache.

"Go ahead, Lippy," Moran said coldly.

"Awright! Dalivar'll do this—you step aside, an' Dalivar'll fix things. He'll put your clothes on Weber, bury him as Milt Moran. Then you step into Weber's place in the world. You c'n have Judy, an' you'll be an outlaw no longer."

Moran's face was like something chopped crudely from stone. But, deep inside his gaunt, leathery frame, emotions clawed at one another. This thing which Dalivar offered him was return to life. Return to the vital, warm world of men and women, when a man could find comfort and friendship, and maybe love.

In the identity of Rance Weber, Moran could step off the owl-hoot trail, could fool those sinister buzzards which circled at the end of it. No more dodging, no more crouching along in the rain beside smoky campfires, no more rolling into wet soogans. The thing could be worked out, too, for no one in Thunder Pass would dare say a word. . . .

After all, why not take the chance? Moran had lived as a lobo wolf, predatory, grim, bitter. A wolf had no loyalties. . . .

Moran turned his bitter eyes upon Lippy Krune and the sheriff winced.

"That," Moran stated, "is just about the kind of a fool idea I'd expect a gent with Dalivar's Mex blood to think up. You go tell him that I'm going to blow him apart, before this thing is over."

Krune tugged at his mustache. He was afraid of Moran and was even more afraid of going back to Dalivar with the wrong report.

"Dust out of here!" Moran ordered.

Like a man stung by a whip, the sheriff obeyed, trotted down the stairs with his empty holsters flapping.

The Lobo glided along the hallway, to the window at the end. Looking down, he saw that the hotel building was surrounded. But the mob was making no effort to enter. They lacked leadership.

Moran turned back, without firing a shot, located the trapdoor which led to the roof, climbed onto the bannister, pushed the trapdoor open, hauled his gaunt body through.

The sun had lifted reluctantly above the peaks but there was no warmth in the blinding light. The rattle and crash of gunfire pulsed through Thunder Pass like a raging storm.

Moran heard a frantic call from Rance Weber but, smiling grimly, he made no answer.

He inched along the roof, keeping out of sight of the men on the ground, found a suitable spot for the leap, and jumped to the roof of the adjoining building, a store. From here he crossed to the roof of the blacksmith shop, where he slid down a lean-to and hit the ground.

Instantly, he darted into the alley, where, somehow, the night still lingered. The night which is home, to the lobo. . . .

He prowled along until he saw Lippy Krune legging down the street. Keeping in the shadows, Moran trailed along.

Krune met Dalivar in the narrow space between the feed store and the undertaker's. Dalivar, whose right arm was bandaged now, handed the sheriff's guns to Krune, and listened to Lippy's excited explanation.

Moran eased along, then pounced forward and jabbed the muzzle of his gun against Krune's back. Krune let out a little squeal, stiffened, dropped his guns. Dalivar, peering up at Moran, stepped back, then halted, with his dark face frozen in an expression of surprise and fear.

"Get moving, gents," the Lobo Lawman said. "We're going to your house on Gallows Hill, Dalivar, pronto!"

Moran stooped, picked up Krune's guns. Then he herded his captives in a circle around the town, keeping carefully out of sight of the mob, and headed toward Gallows Hill.

Dalivar's house was new, and arrogantly ornate. As the three men approached the house, Dalivar said nothing but there was something in the man's manner that warned Milt Moran of danger.

"Walk right in," Moran ordered, grimly, when they reached the house.

Smirking gently, Dalivar obeyed. Lippy Krune, prodded by the Lobo Lawman's six-gun, followed the Mex. And Moran stalked into the house last of all.

A pretty elegant layout, this one. There were rugs on the floor, a goldfish bowl, some ornate furniture. Over in a corner, Judy was bound to a straight-backed chair. Two gunhawks, who had been sitting facing the girl, now were whirling to their feet, kicking back their chairs. One had a rifle across his knees. The other was going for the guns which were tied low on his thighs. Moran could tell that both men were killers—it was written all over them.

There was no mercy in the Lobo now. Tense as a gaunt wolf poised for the kill, he thumbed the hammers of his own and one of Krune's guns. The weapons bucked against the taut, steel-like muscles of his arms, thundered.

The gunhawk who was trying to draw pistols jerked, screamed as he spun around. The man's hands clawed, slower and slower, at his guns as he went down. The other gunhawk managed to get his rifle lined on Moran, but that was all. Moran's bullets drove the man back against the wall, each slug beating a little puff of dust from the gunhawk's shirt, each impact driving a gust of air from his twitching mouth. When the last gust of breath was beaten out of him, the man slid gently to the floor.

Lippy Krune and Dalivar backed away, terrified, staring first at the dead gunhawks, then at the Lobo Lawman.

Judy, white-faced in the presence of sudden death, looked at Milt Moran. The

girl's chin was high and in her expression there was a sort of solemn pride.

Moran stalked across the room, took a a knife from his pocket, slashed the ropes which bound the girl.

"Hello, Judy," he said. Simple words, these, reaching across the gap of the years.

"Milt! Milt, where is Rance? Is he—is he—"

"Rance is okay. He's at the hotel, standin' off the mob that Dalivar, here, sent after him."

The girl shuddered. "Milt, you left him alone, to stand—"

"Figured it was best," the Lobo said gently. "Give him a chance to stand on his own hind legs—"

"But this house is close to town—those men must have heard the shooting here. They'll head this way, leave Rance—" The girl spoke with a swift, bounding hopefulness.

Krune had waddled to a window. "Y'bet they heard and they're a-comin' hell bent!" he reported. "Moran, what you gonna do? Them gents are thinkin' that maybe somethin' happened tuh Dalivar. They'll be in killin' mood!"

Krune was getting set to switch his allegiance again. Moran gave the man a frosty smile, and then looked at Dalivar, who was standing complacently near one of the corners of the room, making no move.

A strange sort of a gent, this one. He sought to cover up his basic greasiness by an ornate outfit and crisp mannerisms. But he was dangerous, in spite of his appearance. Dangerous not because of any personal power, but because he was shrewd enough to marshal and to control the deadliness of other men. That lynch mob, which was pounding toward this house right now, was Dalivar's servant.

But Dalivar was not the kind of an opponent that Milt Moran was used to handling. Dalivar did not fight the Lobo's way. His weapons were cunning and trickery, not guns or fists.

Dalivar smiled, now, as the yells and the hoofbeats of the approaching mob became louder, clearer.

Milt Moran took one step toward the Mex, then halted. Dalivar was not even packing iron, now. Killing him would be an empty gesture.

Krune, scared white, peered once more through the window, then turned to Moran, spoke a hurried dribble of words.

"Milt, 've gotta get out of here! Them hombres will—"

Moran shook his head gently. "Not a chance. We've got no horses. They have. They'd see us on the hill, ride us down. We're staying here."

Moran flashed a keen, searching glance to Judy's white face. Despite her fear she remained calm. This mob, in racing here to Dalivar's house, had left but a few men in town, to keep Rance Weber penned up in the hotel. Weber had a chance, now, and in order that he should have a chance, Judy was ready to sacrifice her own life.

A gent could be proud of a woman like Judy, the Lobo reflected. And the thought brought searing regret.

Moran moved swiftly to a window, broke the glass, fired at the mob which was circling the house, and drove the riders quickly to cover.

"It's Moran, all right!" somebody yelled. "I told you gents it was him I seen, sneakin' out of town with Krune an' Dalivar. If you'd listened to me—Dalivar. Hey, Dalivar, you in there?"

Moran looked contemptuously at the Mex. "I'm hopin' you'll move, or let out a yell," he said grimly. "It'll give me an excuse to gun you down."

Dalivar's white teeth flashed in a smile which was backed up by vast amusement. "I shall be very careful, señor," he taunted.

Knowing the menace which it faced, the

mob went to work now with grim energy, Somebody seized the reins of leadership, shouted orders. Crouching behind what cover they could find, the men started shooting at the house.

Moran, darting from window to window, answered the gunfire as best he could. But he couldn't be everywhere at once and, taking advantage of that fact, the mob closed in relentlessly.

A bullet gashed the Lobo's side, forcing a gasp of pain from his suddenly white lips, spinning him part way around. He saw Dalivar dart toward him, as quick as a striking snake. Lippy Krune trailed along, copying Dalivar's move.

But Moran caught himself, swung his guns upon the two of them, smiled coldly. Dalivar and Krune halted in their tracks, backed away uncertainly.

Judy, with quick concern for Moran, moved toward him; but he shook his head and ordered her into a corner where she'd be safe.

Morning sunlight was reaching through the windows, now. And in the unwary instant when the Lobo was ordering Judy Weber back, a bullet reached greedily out of nowhere and struck him in the back.

The impact was a jarring, sickening thing. It reached right into the core of the Lobo, blotted out all strength. He was going down, and he knew it. His guns were dropping from nerveless hands.

Then Dalivar and Krune were darting forward once again, their greedy little eyes centered on those guns.

Moran knew that if he lost conciousness he lost everything. Lost his chance to rebuild Rance Weber, to give back to Judy the man she loved. But he was paralyzed by bullet shock, and pain was clamping down, shutting out all else.

He could still see, however. He saw Dalivar snatch up one of the guns, saw Krune grab the other one. Saw Judy rush forward, struggle with Krune, try to wrench the weapon from the sheriff's hands.

Dalivar thumbed back the hammer of the gun which he had grabbed, centered the weapon upon the helpless Lobo, smiled crookedly.

Moran tried his level best to move and couldn't. . . .

Dimly he saw the door of the house slam open, saw Rance Weber come backing into the room with bucking, smoking guns roaring at the mob outside. Weber was badly wounded. Blood streamed from an ugly gash in the side of his head, one sleeve was suspiciously darkened, one leg dragged. But the man's back was straight, his voice had something of its old snap and vigor as he shouted at the mob.

Dalivar saw Weber too and swung quickly to center Moran's gun on the cowman's back.

The Lobo pulled himself together with an effort which racked his whole being, brought streams of cold sweat to his face. He got to his feet, tottering, and lunged at Dalivar.

He was as wiry and as tough as the wolves which were his kin; and by the time he smashed into Dalivar, his strength was flowing back into his muscles.

Dalivar's head swiveled and he screamed with terror when he saw Moran's bitter, predatory face. Dalivar tried to swing the gun back upon Moran, but the Lobo tore the weapon from the Mexican's grip, jammed the muzzle of it into Dalivar's ribs.

"Get to that window, hombre!" Moran rasped. "Tell them fools outside that you made a mistake, that Weber's no rustler!"

Dalivar knew that he was within an inch of death and he obeyed.

Moran swung his head, as a wolf might do, toward Lippy Krune. And that was enough, for Lippy. The sheriff gave Judy the gun for which they had been struggling, and backed away with his hands in the air.

The mob broke up, grumbling, after Dalivar had finished his say. A few hotheads hankered for further action, suspected that Dalivar was being forced into this talk. But the flare of mob spirit had run its course and it didn't need much to kill it completely, now. Dalivar, who seemed to know what was good for him, supplied what was needed.

Rance Weber, smiling as a man smiles when he realizes that he has regained something precious, advanced across the room and took Judy in his arms.

"All of a sudden," Weber drawled, flashing that old, boyish grin of his, "the mob went leggin' for horses, rode out of town, headed this way. I'd seen you an' Krune an' Dalivar come up the hill so when the mob followed your trail, I figured I'd be needed. So I come a-runnin'."

Rance Weber was a man once more. And in Judy's eyes, as she looked across Weber's shoulder at the Lobo, there was inexpressible gratitude. Moran smiled, wryly. He had something to be glad for, too—his strategy had rebuilt a man. But neither Rance nor Judy, probably, would ever realize just how exactly Moran had planned this thing so that Weber would be made to feel that he was needed. . . .

And that was just as well.

Moran was hit pretty badly but, after seeing to it that Dalivar was escorted out of Thunder Pass, he put himself in the hands of the doctor, and was patched up.

For two weeks of luxury, the Lobo lay in a real bed, regaining strength. Rance and Judy were near him, all the time. They put up some tall arguments to persuade him to stay and they thought they'd succeeded.

Then, one day, they found the Lobo's bed empty, his outfit and his horse gone.

They saw him that evening. A gaunt figure up in the Pass, riding into the darkness which is home, to the Lobo. . . .

The Cactus City Department

BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR

VOL. 19 NO. 57

NEW GOLD RUSH

Gazette's Scientific Investigation a Big Success

What this town needs is more citizens like Foxy Farley. Now, there is a gent who has got lots of brains and ingenuity besides being smart. When he went busted in the cattle business he didn't set around a-moaning and a-groaning like a cow a-calfing. No, sir! Foxy he sets around thinking and planning for a spell and invents hisself a brand new industry, which he turns out to be very good at.

This new business of Foxy's is gold mining but it ain't just the ordinary kind of gold mining. Foxy gets plenty of gold, but he don't pick it out with a shovel. Instead, he sets hisself down in a nice comfortable chair and does his mining with a pen.

Sounds right mysterious, don't it? So I guess I better explain that Foxy's business is drawing maps of Lost Gold Mines, which same he sells to tourists and other suckers.

For any amount from $5 to $500, (depending on the looks of the customer) Foxy will part with the secret to a Lost Mine. Just what mine it is depends on the day of the week. For instance, on Tuesdays Foxy sells only maps of the Peg Leg Mine; on Wednesdays, the Lost Padre Mine; on Thursdays, the Dutch Oven Mine, etc., etc., every day except Sundays, which Foxy uses to get drunk on.

Now let me tell you that these here maps Foxy makes are very convincing; you got to hand it to him for making them look genuine. I would have swore that the map he sold to me was the real thing.

Also his story was very good. He had me almost crying tears when he told how a old dying Injun chief had given him that very map with his last living breath. I sure was very astounded when, at the end of his story, Foxy allowed he would sell me the map to Fabulous Riches for only $40 in cash money.

For the benefit of certain sneering citizens I better state right here that I knew that map was a fake all the time. I just bought it as a scientific investigation, so's I would have the whole truth and nothing but the truth about this new industry to print in this newspaper.

And incidentally, that is the only kind of truth which this paper prints.

BUSINESS BOOMS

But Customers Are Touchy

Ever since that niece of the Maverick Moores has come to visit them, Judd Ovitt has done a rushing business taking orders for mail-order store clothes. You see, that niece is mighty pretty and all the young bucks of the town is getting duded up to set the bag with her.

Already Judd has taken the measurements for six and a half (6½) blue serge suits, and it will be an even seven just as soon as young Goose Goodson can get hisself under control.

Goose is one of them gents who is plumb ticklish and touchy, so Judd had a time with him. After a awful struggle, Judd finally got the dimensions for Goose's coat and vest, but when he went on to finish the measuring, Goose let out a whoop, then dived through a window.

But Judd says he is going to finish the measuring even if he has to hog-tie Goose.

GAME TO THE LAST GASP

Death No Detriment to Horse Trader

A lot of folks when they is caught bluffing will up and admit they was. But not so with Wild-horse Horton, who got hisself violently killed the other day. Not even in the face of death did he spit backwards on his bluff.

You see, Wild-horse was right in the middle of selling a horse to Choctaw Tolliver. It was a wall-eyed, snaky brute, and Wild-horse was doing some of his best lying to put the deal over. Like when he lead the bronc out of the corral, it up and bit a chunk out of his shoulder that would have made a ordinary man holler with pain. But Wild-horse didn't even bat a eye.

Choctaw, however, he right quick exclaimed, "I won't buy that hoss! He's too dang vicious!"

"Vicious? Why, Choctaw, I'm surprised at yuh. This hoss ain't atall vicious. He's just—just playful, that's all," says Wild-horse.

Even with his shoulder half bit off, he makes the bluff in a convincing way. In fact, Choctaw was just on the point of buying, when the cayuse showed its meanness again. This time it hauled off and kicked Wild-horse in the head.

It was a powerful kick, and it bashed in Wild-horse's skull pretty bad. He must have known he was a goner, but even then he kept up his bluff. He knew his son, War-horse, would carry on the business, and he wasn't going to let a little thing like a fatal accident spoil a sale. So with his dying breath he gasped:

"Yuh see? I—I told yuh —the horse—was playful."

That, citizens, is bluffing of the best variety.

EDITORIAL

Usually when this here newspaper takes pen in hand to make a editorial, it is for the benefit of respectable citizens. But this time, the lecture is wrote special for outlaws, who is showing all the signs of getting tinhorn.

Up until recently, our Fair City could boast of having only Class A outlaws in our midst. That is, outlaws who had some pride about what they stole and who they stole it from. The last bit of local thievery, however, was did by a very third-rate thief.

Instead of robbing a bank or holding up a stage, like any self-respecting outlaw would do, why this gent busted into the Town Hall and stole the cash box containing all the Town's Surplus Money. Now, that was a pretty small caliber thing to do, especially as the surplus amounted to only $6.50 and a couple of IOU's which probably ain't any good anyways.

But it ain't the money, it's the principle of the thing that I'm preaching about. Such things as that is what give this town a bad name. Why don't the petty larceny gent who did that thieving get hisself elected to some Public Office before he starts stealing the taxpayers' money? Where is his Civic Pride?

WATER TEST

After getting hisself shaved at the Gem Barber Shop and Baths, Rawhide Rawlins got up out of the chair and headed straight for the water cooler. He dippered out a mouthful, but he didn't swallow it, just held it in his mouth and commenced shaking his head violently from side to side.

This was pretty mystifying to Cross-cut Kane, who had done the shaving, and he exclaimed with alarm, "Rawhide, are you gone loco?"

"Naw, not loco. I'm jus' curious," answered Rawhide. "After that shave, I just wanted to see if my face still holds water."

LAST LAUGH

Necktie Party Victim's Behavior Explained

It wasn't until today that folks found out why Tex Tennant acted so peculiar last Monday. It was on Monday, you remember, that Tex was hanged for horse stealing. And all the time that the lynchers was fixing the rope, etc., Tex was just laughing his head off. Even as the horse was drove out from under him to snap his neck, Tex was fair to busting with belly laughs.

Now, that is hardly the right way to act when you are cashing out your chips, so folks figured that Tex had went loco. However, it was found out today that he was nothing of the sort. He was laughing because he had a good right to, because he knew a good joke on the lynchers. Tex knew very well that they was hanging the wrong man; the real horse thief was discovered today.

So you folks who have been saying Tex was loco should ought to give him due apology. He wasn't crazy; he just had a good sense of humor.

SMART BUYER

Bull Billings Prepares for Future

When Bull Billings went into Short-weight Weston's store for to order a new baby cradle, he allowed that this time he wanted a good strong one that would last.

"Last?" yelps Short-weight, indignant. "Yuh can't say that the last one I sold yuh didn't last! That was maybe eighteen years ago, an' yuh've raised some twenty kids in it!"

"Yeah, that's right," Bull had to agree. "But, I tell yuh, I want a better one this time. I don't want to have to be orderin' a new cradle every twenty years or so."

It looks like Bull is a pretty shrewd buyer—that is, if he ain't overestimating hisself.

SOCIETY NEWS

On account of this town being full of chattering old gossips, there ain't much to be said about the Social Functions of Cactus City. Most of the details is passed over the back fence from one limber-jawed old hen to the next, so that there ain't much news left for this here paper to print.

However, there is one item which will bear repeating, and that is the marriage of Shorty Chavoor. This was very startling because Shorty is a sheep herder, and sheepherders usually don't get theirselfs married; they is perfectly content to spend their life on the range with their woollies, without undertaking the responsibility of household duties.

Shorty also would have been content with same, he admits, if only he could have found a sheep that could cook. That is the way some people are; they want *everything*.

ASKS FOR HELP

Law Passed to Protect Bass Horn Player

Leo Schilling, leader of the Cactus City Band, was present at the last meeting of the Town Council. He asked that they pass a law against gun-fighting at Band Concerts. Always when a gun-fight breaks out, said Leo, it gets a lot more attention than the music, and this is very impolite to the gents who have practiced hard to give a good concert.

Besides that, Leo allowed that a gun-fight is awful hard on the bass horn player. A bass horn has got such a big bell on it that it catches a lot of stray bullets, which go round and round in the horn and then down the player's throat.

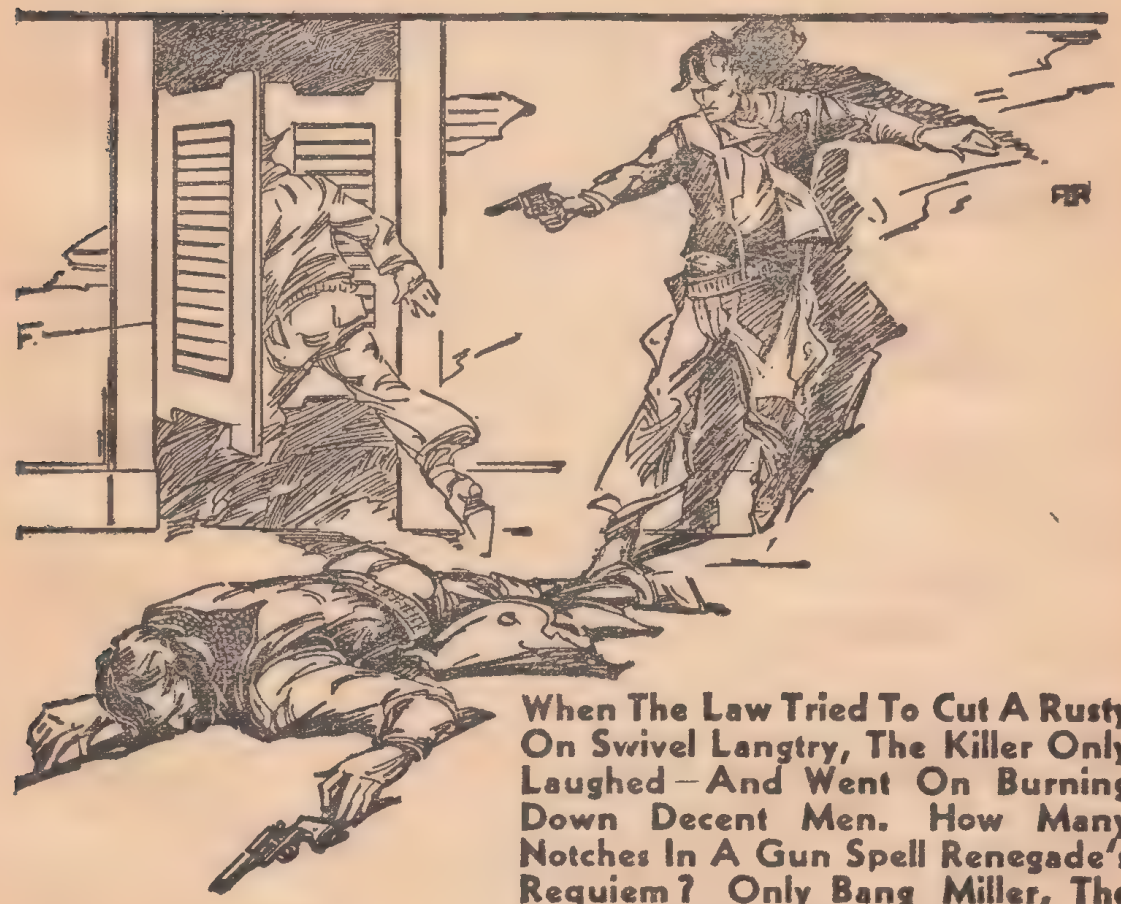
After the last Band Concert, during which there was three fights, the bass horn player was laid up for a week with indigestion and heartburn on account of the hot lead he had swallowed during the shooting.

Gun-Fighter's Trophy

By

CHARLES M. MARTIN

Author of "DOUBLE OR NOTHING," "MAVERICK MONEY," *etc.*



When The Law Tried To Cut A Rusty On Swivel Langtry, The Killer Only Laughed—And Went On Burning Down Decent Men. How Many Notches In A Gun Spell Renegade's Requiem? Only Bang Miller, The Dead Sheriff's Button, Knew . . .

Old Sam Body spurred his steaming horse through the corrals on the S Bar B while his narrowed gray eyes scanned the crowd on the top rails of the breaking tank. Young Bang Miller was just finishing a ride on a Roman-nosed stallion, and he high-heeled across the ankle-deep dust when old Sam slid his hammer-head to a stop and stepped down to crawl through the bottom bars.

"You better gear yore tops and fog in after the mail," Sam Body said, lowering his voice. "I didn't have time to wait for the stage!"

The young buckaroo balanced on his hand-made boots and studied the weathered face of his boss. Not more than twenty-four against the sixty-odd years of old Sam. Steady and quiet like most Texas bronc-stompers, and an expert at reading sign. Old Sam was plucking nervously at the handle of the old Peacemaker thonged low on his lean right leg.

"Gun trouble?" Bang Miller watched Sam Body closely.

Old Sam glanced at the riders on the top rail. "You jiggers hit yore saddles and get to movin'," he bellowed angrily. "A

man can't ride to town without the lot of you taking a vacation. Get goin' before I start writing time!"

The cowboys slid to the ground without answering. They knew that something was up to make old Sam stampede into the home corrals with his spurs scratching, and disappointment showed on bronzed faces when they walked to the horse corral and shook out their loops. Young Bang Miller waited with a look of understanding in his wide blue eyes.

"If you can't talk, make signs," he murmured. "Who was this gent what wanted to match sixes again you?"

"She wasn't my put-in nohow," and old Sam Body shook his lean frame angrily. "Swivel Langtry done for Maricopa Powers back there in the Blue Dome!"

"Them two," the buckaroo shrugged carelessly. "Just like Dad always said, one of them had to go. Neither one of them ever worked a lick, and they been edging at each other for most a year."

"Yeah," growled the old cattleman. "And now Swivel Langtry is kingpin of Maverick!"

"I got nothing again him except that he uses a swivel holster," and Bang Miller dug a little hole in the dust with the toe of his boot. "Yo're clouding the sign, old Sam."

"Them two notch-whittlers was drinking in the Blue Dome," Body grunted. "Silk Tremont was dealing faro while Baldy Sours tended bar. Yore name was mentioned before the fireworks started!"

"Yeah?" Bang Miller dropped his hand and fingered his empty holster. "Such as how?"

"Maricopa Powers said there was only one man in Maverick faster than him with a cutter," and Sam Body spat in the dust. "Swivel Langtry took him up pronto and remarked that there was two men faster than Powers. Then he stepped back and slapped down for his cutter like a cat pawing at a ball. Caught Powers flat-footed and proved his point to his own satisfaction. Baldy Sours was bending a tarp around Powers to keep him from drawing flies when I left!"

Bang Miller frowned thoughtfully. "Powers was nothing to me," he muttered. "That gives Dad just that much less to worry about."

Old Sam Body kicked gravel angrily. "What I'm trying to tell you," he bellowed, "is that yore Paw who's been sheriff here for twenty years, is right now figgering on taking Swivel Langtry in for the killing!"

Bang Miller drew a deep breath. "Like you said, O. K. Miller has been sheriff for twenty years," he answered quietly. "He taught me all I know about six-guns and gun-fighters, and he is still fairly rapid with his irons!"

"But not as rapid as Swivel Langtry," the old cattleman snapped. "You and I both knows it, and so does Langtry!"

The two men stared at each other. Bang Miller saw the fear in the eyes of his boss, and he shivered slightly when a chill ran up his spine. Then he shook his head as a worried expression spread across his tanned face.

"You know O. K.," he muttered. "He wouldn't stand for any interference where his duty is concerned!"

"Now look, Bang," whispered old Sam hoarsely. "I done made you ramrod of the S Bar B to keep you from taking that deputy job yore Paw offered you. Looks like I done made a mistake. Yo're fired!"

The young buckaroo regarded him with flashing eyes. "Why you sway-backed ole spavin," he began, and then choked off his words when he saw the frosty smile on old Sam's face.

Sam Body reached over and tapped young Bang's chest with a stubby forefinger. "Fired like I said," he repeated. "Account of O. K. Miller needing a deputy worser than I need a ramrod for a spell

of time. Now go get yoreself dressed proper while I bolt a hull on that line-back dun of yores."

Bang nodded and slid between the bars. His face was grim when he returned to the corral with a long-barreled .45 riding in the moulded holster on his right leg. The old cattleman was tightening the double-rigged kak on the dun, and he dropped the saddle-fender with a grunt as his narrowed eyes swung down to the worn-handled Colt.

"Hit yore saddle and set that dun's hoofs on fire," he growled. "Yore job will be waiting if you want it!"

Miller swung up to the saddle and waved his hand. "Be seein' you, boss," he muttered, and jabbed the hooks savagely.

Old Sam Body watched the dun rocket across the yard and down the lane toward the cattle-shipping town of Maverick. "Hope he gets there in time," he whispered, but his faded eyes were shadowed with doubt.

Baldy Sours moved his fat frame about on catlike feet behind the bar in the Blue Dome. His eyes kept darting between the two men at the Faro layout and the swinging front doors. Silk Tremont was shuffling the pasteboards expertly and dealing dummy hands while the old sheriff watched with a frown on his seamed face.

"Better lay off Swivel Langtry, O. K.," the gambler murmured, and his soft voice purred like rubbing silk. "There's only one man here in Maverick can match him with a cutter!"

"And I'm him," grunted the sheriff. "Not that I care a hoot about Maricopa Powers, but Langtry downed him on a sneak!"

The gambler shrugged. "You didn't see him do it," he suggested softly. "But I was talking about Bang."

"Bang has him a good job roddin' the S Bar B for old Sam Body," the sheriff growled. "I wanted him to take on as my deputy, but old Sam raised the ante. Not that I need any help," he muttered.

"You take young Bang," and Silk Tremont kept on dealing. "He's as fast as Billy the Kid ever was. He's faster than old Kingfisher."

Baldy Sours coughed desperately, and finally the gambler looked up. His gray eyes narrowed when he saw Swivel Langtry standing in the middle of the room with a scowl on his heavy face. His thick lips were drawn back wolfishly and, as he stared at the gambler smouldering flames blazed in his little eyes.

"You buyin' chips?" he asked with a sneer.

Silk Tremont shrugged carelessly. "My job is casing the layout," he answered clearly. "But I don't booger easy, Langtry!"

Swivel Langtry hitched up his gunbelt, and swaggered forward. The Kingfisher holster swung loosely on the oiled rivet that fastened it to the heavy belt, and O. K. Miller sucked in his breath noisily and stepped back to watch. Silk Tremont was fast with a six-gun, and absolutely fearless, and now the gambler pushed back from the table to face the gunman.

"You mentioned Billy the Kid and old Kingfisher," Langtry said coldly. "The Kid was over-rated, but I taken exception to what you said about that sterling old gun-hawk, Kingfisher. He was the fastest lead slinger Texas ever saw!"

"Folks down here didn't like his style," answered the gambler in the same quiet tone. "Texas is a tie-down country, and Kingfisher shot second the last time he tried to work that swivel trick!"

Langtry stared while his right hand hooked in his gunbelt. "Yo're a tie-down man," he sneered. "And I'm saying that yo're a liar about ole Kingfisher!"

Silk Tremont straightened and twitched the tails of his frock coat with his elbows. Two spots of color leaped to his

high cheekbones and his gray eyes narrowed and focused on the killer's contemptuous face.

"Mebbe I can't match you with a cutter," the gambler said softly. "But I try to match any man who asks for showdown. Bang Miller could beat Kingfisher, and draw honest like a white man!"

His right hand started for his gun when Swivel Langtry dropped his hand to the swinging holster. The gambler cleared leather just as gun-light winked out from the bottom of the killer's scabbard. Silk Tremont triggered a slug into the floor between his feet when he was jerked back by an unseen force. Then he buckled his knees and sat down in his heavy chair. A moment later his head fell to the table with a little thud of finality.

The old sheriff set his lips and turned to glare at the killer. Long white cowhorns framed his stern mouth, and his spare shoulders were hunched forward with determination. Swivel Langtry grinned and tilted his holster up without drawing.

"Self-defense," he growled, and grinned like a lobo. "Him and me settled an argument. How about it, Baldy?"

The fat bartender shrugged and shook his head. "I was wiping the bar," he muttered. "Count me out!"

"That's right good sense, feller," commended Langtry. "But I got me one good witness to prove that Silk drawed first!"

"That's twice in the same day, Langtry." O. K. Miller tried to control his anger. "I'm warnin' you to roll yore soogans and make tracks going away!"

"Giving me notice to leave town, eh?" the gunman chuckled, and then his face grew hard. "Now you listen to me, Mister," he barked. "I'll be here long after you are gone. You heard what that cardsharp said about this cow-proddin' yearlin' they call Bang!"

The old sheriff stiffened and bit his lower lip. "Yo're talkin' about my chip," he said and his voice was low and savage.

Swivel Langtry shrugged carelessly. "Like you said," he agreed. "And he better not cut my sign if he wants to grow up!"

The old sheriff remained silent until his anger had passed. Then he turned his back and walked over to the bulletin board at the end of the bar. His gnarled hand reached inside his coat and brought out a folded paper. Then he drew his gun and reversed the butt to hammer a tack into the board.

Swivel Langtry dropped his hand to his swinging holster and held the drop. The sheriff kept his back turned while he walked to the bar and leaned his elbows on the mahogany. His head jerked toward the paper on the billboard.

"Read it," he clipped. "I should have posted it sooner!"

Swivel Langtry strolled slowly to the board and spelled out the notice aloud.

On and after this date it will be unlawful for anyone to carry firearms within the city limits of Maverick. This does not apply to duly constituted forces of law and order. Violation shall be punished by thirty days in jail, and due notice to leave town when sentence is completed.

O. K. Miller, Sheriff.

Swivel Langtry finished reading, threw back his head and laughed raucously. The old sheriff turned slowly and faced him with jutting jaw and a scowl on his weathered face.

"You think it's funny?" he asked sternly.

"You made that up yore ownself," Langtry sneered. "Now all you got to do is make it stick!"

"Keep that hand away from yore gun!" Sheriff Miller snapped the order with his hand wrapped around the handle of his old Peacemaker Colt. Swivel Langtry

stared and then growled deep in his throat.

"I'm giving you till three o'clock to tear down that damn notice," and his little eyes glared without winking. "You can't cut no rusty like that on me!"

"I'm coming to take yore gun," warned the sheriff. "You had yore chance, and you turned it down!"

His right hand twitched with the old pass that had earned him a place among the fastest. Swivel Langtry dropped his hand and tilted the swinging holster with his finger through the trigger guard. His gun roared to beat the echo of the sheriff's shot just enough to stop the tilting barrel, and Baldy Sours stared with gaping mouth.

The old sheriff teetered while the smoking gun dropped from his hand. His bullet had ripped the floor between Swivel Langtry's boots, and the killer was holding his holstered gun for a follow-up with the hammer eared back. The sheriff teetered too far and crashed to the sawdust with a crimson banner spreading across the shirt over his heart.

"You killed the sheriff," Baldy Sours whispered.

"Yeah," Langtry grunted. "And this time you wasn't wiping no bar. Did you see him draw first?"

"I liked old O. K. Miller," the fat bartender muttered sullenly. "You better light a shuck before Bang hears about this!"

The killer swore angrily and swiveled the cut-away holster in line. "Mebbe you want some of the same," he growled. "I want Bang Miller to hear all about it, and you better tell it straight!"

Baldy Sours shrugged helplessly. "I'll tell him," he muttered. "You can kill me if you ain't satisfied, but right here and now I'm telling you Bang Miller will take up for his Paw!"

"You shore about that?" grinned the gunman.

"Shore as hell," Baldy shouted excitedly. "And like Silk said, Bang Miller had Kingfisher beat!"

Swivel Langtry grunted viciously and stabbed with his holster. Then he stopped his trigger-finger and stared at the man on the floor. Reached down and flipped the body of the sheriff face-up and pointed to the silver star on the faded vest.

"I'm the fastest gun-hawk in Texas," he boasted loudly. "You tell Bang Miller I said so, and I'm willing to meet him for a prize!"

Baldy Sours wiped the smooth bar automatically. "Prize?" and he stared at the stubbled face of the killer.

"That there silver star," Swivel Langtry grinned. "What you might call a gunfighter's trophy!"

"That star represents the law," muttered the bartender. "Two to one young Bang will pin it on his vest when he hears about his Paw!"

"That's the way I figgered," Langtry chuckled. "I could take it now, but that wouldn't do me no good so long as folks in these parts figger Bang Miller is the fastest with his tools."

The bartender stared. "Meaning what?" he demanded sullenly.

"Meaning that I aim to stay right here in town, and I aim to wear my hardware," announced the killer with a grin. "I reckon you can spell out the rest!"

Baldy Sours drew a deep breath and nodded. "Bang will come a-foggin' when he hears about O. K.," he whispered. "He's bound to pick up where his Paw left off, and he's certain to pin on that old silver star!"

"That's right," jeered Langtry. "And he's bound to use that notice yonder for an excuse. After which I'll take that trophy off his chest and hold down the job myself!"

Baldy Sours sniffed and glanced up at the old clock. "Not quite ten," he remarked carelessly. "You'll be drawin' flies

by noon. Go on and shoot," he said when Langtry dogged back his hammer. "I ain't a gun-fighter, and it wouldn't prove nothing. On top of that, you wouldn't have nobody to deliver yore message!"

"I'll see you later, Baldy," Langtry promised grimly. "But like you mentioned, right now I need you. I'll be back here right on the dot of twelve!"

He glared at the fat bartender and swaggered to the door where his horse was ground-tied. Baldy Sours watched him ride up the dusty street, after which he shook his big head and walked from behind the bar. He dragged the body of Silk Tremont to the back room where he covered it with a heavy tarpaulin. The roar of hoofs hammered against his ear drums as he waddled back to the saloon for his second burden.

Bang Miller threw the dun to its haunches and hit the ground on braking heels. The split reins dropped to anchor the lathered horse, and the tall buckaroo shouldered through the bat-wings and stopped to blink the bright sunlight from his wide blue eyes. He saw Baldy Sours watching him from the middle of the room, and he caught his breath as he followed the bartender's gaze to the body of his father.

"Dead," Baldy Sours muttered. "Swivel Langtry done for him!"

Bang Miller came forward slowly with his hands clenched tight. Then he flipped off his battered black Stetson and hunkered down like a man in a daze. He saw the old gun half-buried in the sawdust; moaned softly when he saw the bullet hole just over his father's heart.

For a moment his eyes closed while he fought against the scalding tears that welled to his eyes. His teeth bit down on his lower lip until he had controlled his emotions, and he reached out slowly and covered the dead man's face with the high-crowned Stetson. Then he nodded his head slowly and unpinned the shiny star from the faded vest. Fastened it to his own cowhide vest on the left side and levered to his feet.

"Swivel Langtry," and his voice was dry and raspy. "Where is the dirty son?"

Baldy Sours walked behind the bar and slid out a bottle and two glasses. "Let's brace ourselves," he growled. "Then I'll give you his message."

The young buckaroo glanced at the body and shook his head. "Help yoreself," he muttered. "I ain't using the stuff today!"

Baldy Sours poured one with sideboards and drank deep. "It was all account of you, yuh might say," he began slowly. "I just dragged Silk Tremont to the back room. Silk opined that you was faster than Billy the Kid and old Kingfisher, and Swivel called him a liar."

"And Silk is dead," the cowboy muttered. "Keep on talking!"

"It was self-defense, Bang," answered the bartender quickly. "Even yore Paw the sheriff had to admit that. He turned his back on Langtry and posted that notice on the board yonder. Reckon you better read it."

Bang Miller high-heeled across to the board. He read the notice slowly and rubbed the silver star on his vest. When he turned to face Baldy Sours, he was smiling grimly.

"I'm arresting that killer for carrying a six-gun," he muttered. "And he won't surrender!"

Baldy Sours sighed and reached for the bottle. "Don't usually touch the stuff when I'm working," he muttered. "But you got to give Swivel Langtry credit for reading sign. What you done so far is just the way he had it figgered out."

"Yeah?" Bang Miller stared at the fat man. "I ain't caught up with you yet!"

The bartender wiped his mouth with the back of his fat hand. "He figgered you'd pin on the star and take up where old

O. K. left off," he explained dryly. "He likewise figgered you would use that notice for an excuse to put you right with the law."

"Then he dogged it," the buckaroo said savagely. "He knew I had him beat!"

Baldy Sours shook his head. "Not being a gun-fighter, I don't understand all I know about such things," he answered slowly. "Swivel Langtry had two good chances to leave town, and he turned them both down. Seems like he sets a heap of store on proving that he's the fastest gun-slammer in West Texas."

"You mean he ain't left town?"

The bartender shook his head. "Old O. K. gave him a chance and he laughed. Then I advised him to hit the breeze before you come to town, and he laughed some more. Allowed as how he was going to be sheriff of Maverick!"

Bang Miller rubbed the handle of his tilted gun. "Where at could I find this mouthy gent?" he inquired softly.

"You won't have to look for him none," answered Baldy Sours. "He said he could take that star before you got here, but he was considering it a gun-fighter's trophy. Bragged that he would take it off yore vest and pin it on his own when the smoke cleared away!"

Bang Miller balanced on his cowboy boots and stared at the bartender. The only expression on his hard face were the leaping flames in his blue eyes. He nodded slowly and waited for the bartender to finish.

"He's coming back here at twelve o'clock," Baldy Sours murmured slowly, "and I was you, I'd get me a rifle and drill him between the shoulders from across the street. After all, you carry the law on yore vest."

Bang Miller shook his head slowly. "Like he said, that's only an excuse," he admitted honestly. "I carry the law in my holster, and he asked for showdown!"

"Wouldn't make no never-minds to me what he asked for," the bartender grunted. "He's a killer, and I'd rub him out all the same wolf!"

Bang Miller glanced at the clock and shrugged. "I'll be back," he said quietly. "Got to see about having the sheriff put away decent."

He walked through the swinging doors without a glance at the body on the floor. Mounted his horse and rode down the dusty street with sobs tearing at his chest. Then he turned in at a furniture store and spoke quietly to a tall bearded man in a long black coat.

"Morning, Tom," he drawled. "Old O. K. is waiting up at the Blue Dome. Him and Silk Tremont both. Give 'em both the best, and send me the bill out at the S Bar B. Old Sam Body is holding my riding pay until I can buy in as podner."

Tom Tarbell nodded slowly. "Heard about it," he murmured. "Didn't want to go up there like a dang buzzard till you gave me the word. Luck to you, Bang Miller, but don't take any chances with that sneak-holster Swivel Langtry is wearing!"

Bang Miller raised his head and stared coldly. "Yore job is looking after the dead," he grunted. "And I ain't dead yet!"

He whirled on his heel and stomped out through the door. Hit the saddle and roared down the street toward the river where the cottonwoods bordered the sloping banks. The horse grazed while the tall cowboy sat on his heels and stared at the muddy water without moving until the sun swung around and hovered almost overhead.

Not until then did Bang Miller lever erect and stretch his long arms. His fingers flexed rapidly before they rapped down and made several practise passes. Then the cowboy checked the gun carefully and lowered the filed hammer on an empty. He was deadly quiet when he mounted the dun and turned back toward Maverick, and his

square jaw was craggy with muscle while his blue eyes burned feverishly.

Nearly every tie-rail in town was filled with sweating horses when Bang Miller stopped in front of the Blue Dome. Not a horse was tied at that particular rail, and the cowboy swung down and made a slip-knot in his mecate. His right hand twitched the handle of his gun against riding crimp when he shouldered through the swinging doors and glanced at the clock on the wall.

He nodded when he saw that the hands pointed to ten minutes until twelve. Then he lowered his head and allowed his eyes to flicker over the faces at the crowded bar. Men looked down into their glasses and avoided his gaze, and Baldy Sours slid bottles and glasses without moving from his position behind the bar. He shook his head when he caught the cowboy's glance, and Bang Miller walked slowly down the room and took the open place at the far end of the bar.

Once his left hand rubbed the worn silver star on his vest as he waited and watched the hands of the clock. The front doors burst open suddenly to show Swivel Langtry framed in the opening. Drinkers bellied closer at the bar and averted their faces when the killer stared them down one at a time. Bang Miller kept his eyes on the old clock, and Langtry shrugged and made his way to the bar.

"Whiskey straight!" he growled, and downed the liquor neat.

Three minutes until noon with a grim silence hanging over the crowded saloon. Baldy Sours leaned against the back bar and kept both hands in sight. Swivel Langtry read the sign and grinned. His little eyes swept back to the face of Bang Miller, but the cowboy was still watching the minute hand of the old clock.

Two minutes more that seemed like an eternity to the silent line of waiting spectators. They knew Swivel Langtry and Bang Miller; knew that one and maybe both would occupy a slab in the back room of Tom Tarbell's furniture store. All eyes turned to the clock when the rusty spring began to whir a warning.

Swivel Langtry shoved away from the bar and hooked his right hand in his gun-belt. Three inches to the swivel holster swinging gently on its oiled rivet, and the gunman smiled until his lips skinned back to show the blackened snags in his loose mouth.

The clock struck sharply and continued to whir. Bang Miller waited while the strokes mounted to toll the count. The last bell vibrated sharply with the whirring spring whining away, and not until then did the new sheriff remove his eyes from the clock. He stepped away from the bar and faced Swivel Langtry with a nod of his head.

"I got yore message," he drawled softly. "It's straight up twelve o'clock!"

Swivel Langtry reflected the nod. "Yeah," he answered. "And I see you got my trophy pinned on yore chest!"

"These gents all shucked their hardware according to the new town law." Bang Miller jerked his head at the empty holsters along the bar. "I notice that yo're still wearing yores."

His voice was quiet and steady while he stared at the killer. Swivel Langtry nodded again and balanced on his big boots.

"Like you said," he agreed. "I don't hold with that new law like I told yore old man."

"Being what law there is here in Maverick, I'm telling you to turn around while I shuck yore cutter," said the cowboy softly.

Swivel Langtry chuckled. "Just like I told Baldy Sours," he sneered. "You'd pin on the badge, read the notice, and then tell me to hand over my iron. He tell you what I said?"

"I told him," the bartender whispered hoarsely.

"Baldy said you figgered you was the fastest gun-passer in Texas," the young sheriff said in a low voice. "Said you figgered on being the next sheriff if you win the trophy that goes with showdown!"

"Right both times," and Swivel Langtry grinned again. "What we waiting for?"

"Just waiting long enough to tell you that the sheriff is usually elected," and Bang Miller raised up on his toes while the fingers of his left hand unfastened the silver star and laid it on the bar. "I ain't the law no more than you are, you ringy lobo. I'm just another gun-fighter bringing showdown to you. Make yore sneakin' pass, you mangy kiyotte!"

Swivel Langtry stared while the red killer light swept across the pupils of his eyes. His right hand dropped down with finger through the trigger guard while his thumb dogged back the heavy hammer. Bang Miller leaped six feet aside just before the gun roared, and his right hand slapped leather while his wrist cradled against lean ribs on the up-pull.

Red flame splashed out to echo Langtry's shot before the killer could swing his body into line, and Bang Miller made another side-leap while he caught the bucking gun on the recoil and eared back for a follow-up.

Again Langtry tried to swing his body in line while he made three rapid steps backward against the shock of the bullet that battered against his chest. Bang Miller levelled slowly and dropped hammer a second time. The same set expression was on his hard young face when the killer coughed and slumped to the sawdust on his face.

Old Sam Body detached himself from the bar and weaved unsteadily toward the young buckaroo. Bang Miller holstered his old Peacemaker and reached for the worn silver star with fingers that did not tremble.

"You coming back to the S Bar B?" and the old cattleman stared at his young ramrod and held his breath. "You taking up my offer to buy in as my podner?"

Bang Miller stared at the silver star and nodded as he tucked it in his vest pocket. "That's right," he answered softly. "I wasn't cut out to be a lawman, but that old star belonged to Dad personal. It was give to him after he had cleaned out the Morale gang, and both me and Swivel Langtry wanted it. What you might call a gun-fighter's trophy!"

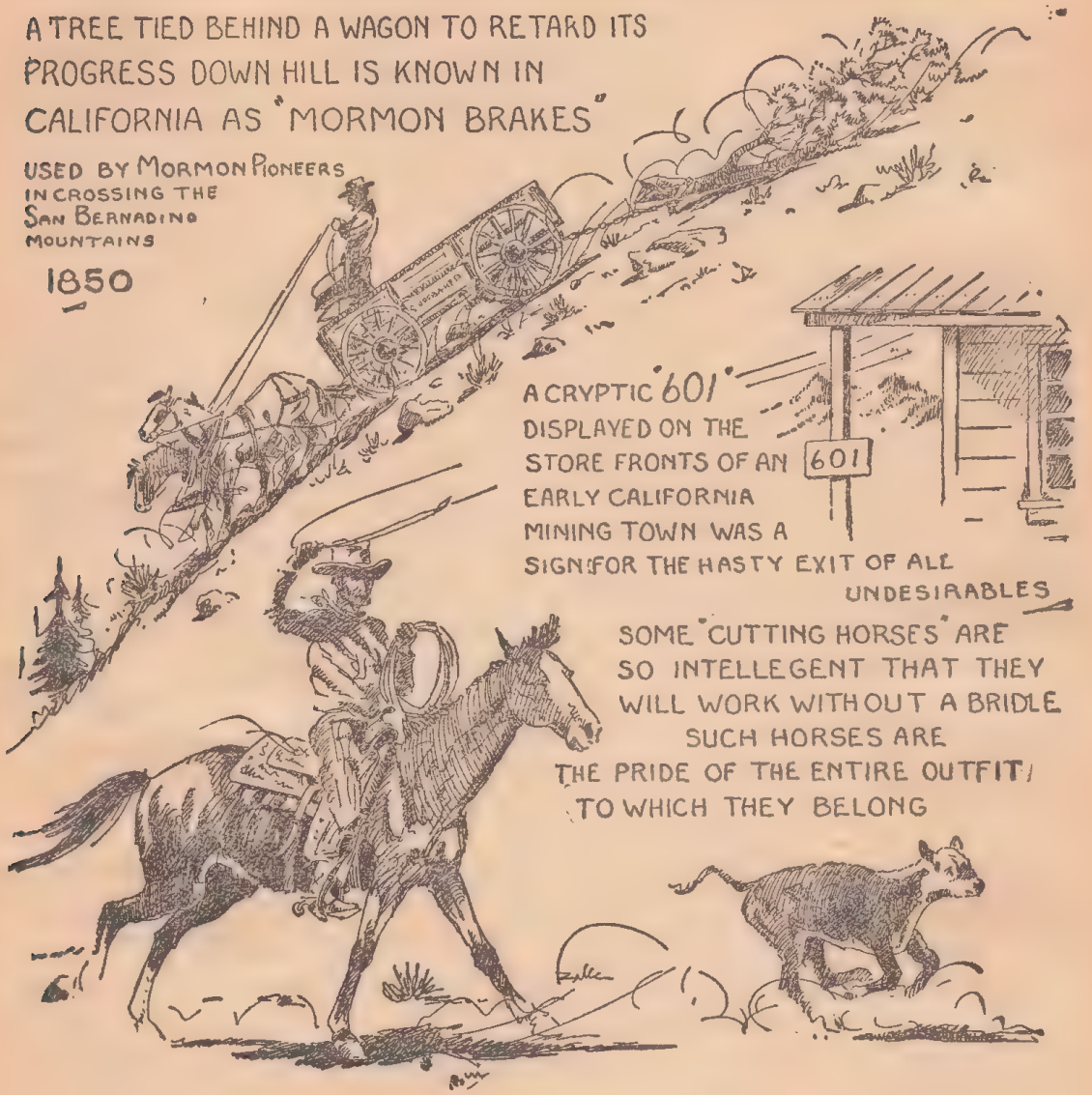
Cow Country Savvy

By E. W. THISTLETHWAITE

A TREE TIED BEHIND A WAGON TO RETARD ITS PROGRESS DOWN HILL IS KNOWN IN CALIFORNIA AS "MORMON BRAKES"

USED BY MORMON PIONEERS IN CROSSING THE SAN BERNADINO MOUNTAINS

1850



A CRYPTIC "601" DISPLAYED ON THE STORE FRONTS OF AN EARLY CALIFORNIA MINING TOWN WAS A SIGN FOR THE HASTY EXIT OF ALL UNDESIRABLES

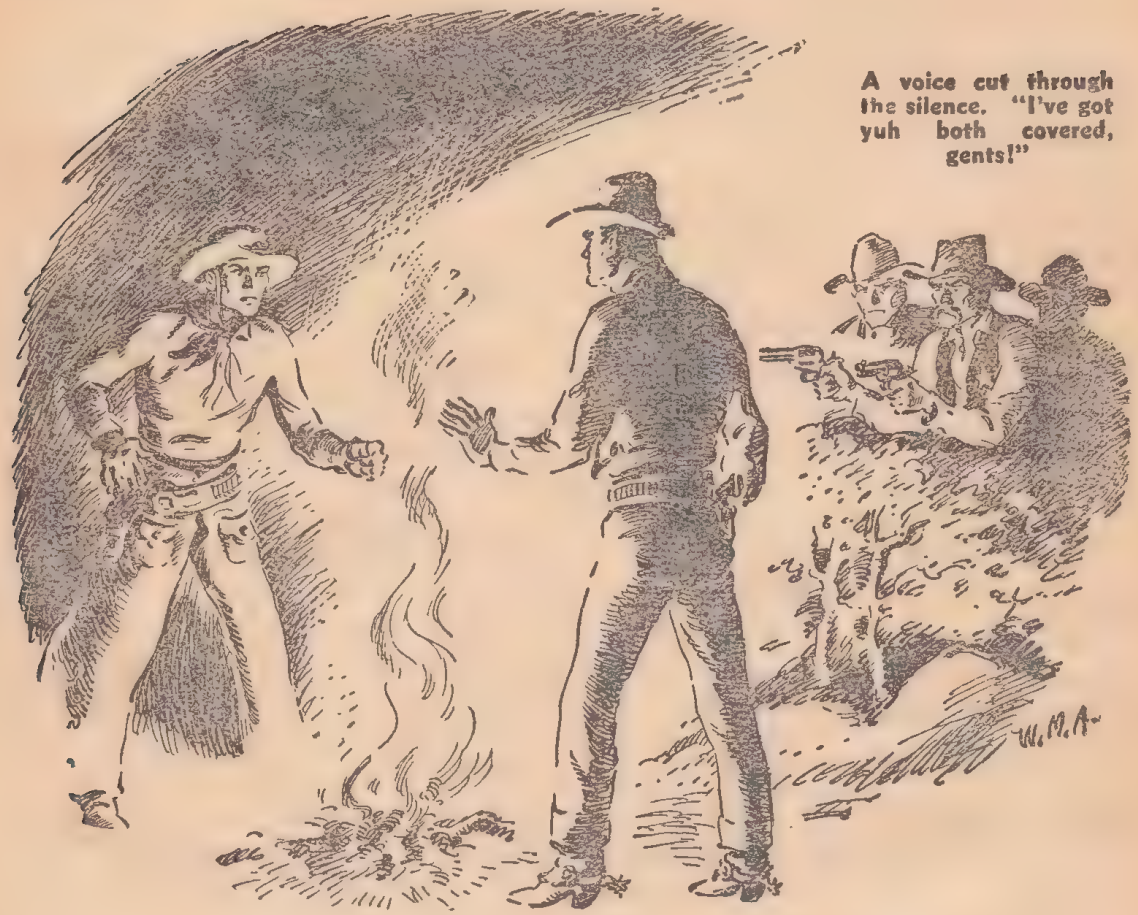
SOME "CUTTING HORSES" ARE SO INTELLEGENT THAT THEY WILL WORK WITHOUT A BRIDLE SUCH HORSES ARE THE PRIDE OF THE ENTIRE OUTFIT TO WHICH THEY BELONG

THE WORD "REMUDA" — MEANING SADDLE-HORSE BAND — IS PRONOUNCED "RE-MOOTH-A"

Murder on the Range

By DARRELL JORDAN

Author of "STAR OF COURAGE," *etc.*



A voice cut through the silence. "I've got yuh both covered, gents!"

Johnny Denver pulled the calico cowpony to a halt on a rocky upthrust of the trail and sat a moment staring back over the little spread that by dint of patient toil and determination he had carved out of the open range.

"When Ben and I was workin' for th' Slash K, they said we wouldn't last six months," he told the calico. "Wal, I reckon we both fooled 'em on that."

Denver's hard, young brown face softened as he gazed at the substantial little frame house, where he lived with his younger brother Blackie, the well-built corrals, and the grassy range dotted with whitefaces. The Circle D was a going spread now, with a dozen head of good horses milling in the pole corrals, and over a hundred and fifty sturdy bald-faced cows grazing over his partially fenced range.

Once The Two Young Waddies Had Been The Best Of Pals. Now They Were Bitter Enemies. Both Had Too Much Pride And In Fighting Each Other They Were Only Destroying Themselves. Which Would Be The First To Discover That They Were Riding A Trail Which Could Only Bring Disaster?

Johnny Denver was still young, but already the stamp of the range was on him—tiny sun wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, a certain capable hardness of body and set of jaw which is the heritage of range riders. Gray eyes glinted beneath the low-pulled Stetson brim, eyes that held in their depths a daredevil recklessness that was an expression of hardy courage and a hair-trigger temper.

A horseman moved across the creek below and slowly cut toward the trail which Denver had been riding. As Denver waited the horse and its rider became familiar to him.

Ben Hardin was Denver's neighbor and close friend. Until two years ago they had shared blankets together as riders for George Kenyon's big Slash K to the north. They had filed on public domain at the same time, had started the modest spreads that finally promised to amount to something.

As he watched Hardin approach, Denver's thoughts went back to the time when his horse had stumbled before a bunch of stampeding steers. It had been Ben Hardin then who had risked death by cutting before the crazed avalanche and swinging Denver up behind him, away from certain, horrible death. That act had cemented between them the friendship that had remained unbroken for years.

Hardin had crossed to the trail, and over his shoulder Denver saw the early afternoon sun glinting on Bearpaw Creek. The Creek, rising in the hills that comprised Hardin's northern boundary, ran down to form a dividing line between the two little ranches, and by range law its waters were accessible to both. Bearpaw Creek had been a great factor in the success that had rewarded their venture.

Hardin reined in, mechanically hooked a knee around the saddle horn, and reached for the makings. A lean young giant with curly, almost white hair, he gazed quizzically at Denver, his glance lingering on the silk neckerchief and pearl gray Stetson that his friend wore.

"How's tricks, fella?" he inquired mildly. "I see yo're all togged out. Ridin' up to th' Slash K, by any chance?"

"I shore ain't gonna chase mulies outa th' brush in this outfit," Denver grinned. "Maybe yore guess is right, Ben."

They talked a few moments over range gossip. Denver saw that Hardin was shifting uneasily in his saddle, noticed a queer expression on his friend's bronzed face.

"Anythin' special on yore mind, Ben?" he asked easily.

Hardin tossed his half smoked querly aside and fumbled nervously with the leather-covered saddle horn.

"Well—I—say, Johnny, was you ridin' over to see Sally Kenyon?"

Denver stiffened. "I shore was, if you wanta know. What of it?"

Hardin had again pulled out papers and tobacco and began rolling another smoke. In his fingers the paper tore and the tobacco spilled to the ground. His face was colored beneath the tan.

"Well, I was just wonderin', that's all. You—you ain't serious with her, are you?"

"What th' hell you drivin' at?" Denver straightened stiffly in his saddle. "It ain't like you to get nosey. Why yuh tryin' to bust into my private affairs?"

"I just wish you'd cut loose there," Hardin blurted. "I—it ain't that I'm tryin' to meddle, Johnny, but—oh, hell, what's th' use?"

"Just what I was thinkin'," Denver retorted coldly. "As far as Sally is concerned, maybe I'm serious, maybe I ain't. Say! Are yuh renegin' on what yuh told me last winter?"

Ben Hardin had half-heartedly courted Sally Kenyon a year or so before, and it was not until he had ceased to ride to the Slash K that Denver had started. They had spoken about it, and Hardin had assured him that Sally meant nothing to him.

Was that it? Was Ben once more in the field?

"Oh, shore not!" Hardin answered his question. "I meant that—damn it, Johnny, I'd like to see you cut loose there!"

Denver turned until he was facing Hardin squarely. "Listen, Ben," he said evenly. "You 'tend to yore own affairs, an' I'll 'tend to mine. That way we get along fine. But when one pardner tries to tell the other where to head in at, why, that don't set so good, 'specially with me."

"Keno with me," Hardin said miserably. "So-long, Johnny."

"So-long," Denver replied stiffly.

He sat with slitted eyes watching Hardin ride away. What was eating the kid, anyway? Ben had never been inquisitive before. Denver tried to forget as he urged the calico on toward the Slash K headquarters.

Sally Kenyon was waiting for him on the vine-covered veranda of the big ranchhouse. The daughter of the Slash K owner was pretty in a doll-like way, and her baby blue eyes lighted at sight of Denver.

"Come right up, Johnny," she gurgled. "What made you so late? I've been expecting you for two hours."

"Had to mend a corral," he said absently, sprawling down on the steps. George Kenyon, bearded and tight-lipped, came stamping into the house. He flung Denver a cordial greeting. Then, a few minutes later, a magnificent figure rode up to the steps and doffed a huge sombrero in an exaggerated bow.

"Howdy, Shard," Denver greeted.

The horseman nodded, dismounted and swung lithely up to the veranda. Kurt Shard, Slash K major-domo, had a weakness for finery. Denver found himself thinking resentfully that Shard's hand-tooled boots and silver ornamented gunbelt alone had cost more than his own entire modest outfit.

Kurt Shard was dark, with startlingly pale eyes and hair. His hooked nose and thin, wide lips suggested Indian blood that the blond hair belied. Yet Denver knew that Shard had a good deal of the Indian in his makeup. He showed it in spasms of cruelty to his mounts and in a preference for bright-hued gaudy finery. Both Denver and Hardin had worked for him for years, and Denver admitted that Shard knew his business. Expert in all range accomplishments, Shard had commanded the respect of his riders, even while some of them had reason to fear him.

"I'm ridin' into Mesa," he told Sally. "Anythin' yuh want from town?"

As the girl shook her head, Shard turned quizzically to Denver. "This spread seems to be shore gettin' popular with th' small owners," he commented meaningly.

"What do yuh mean?" Denver demanded.

"Oh, nothin' special," Kurt Shard grinned sarcastically and swung up on his bay trail horse. "You'll learn, kid, you'll learn."

Denver watched Shard's arrogant figure disappear down the trail before breaking in on Sally's steady chatter.

"What'd he mean by that?" he demanded curiously.

"I don't know," the girl replied. "Oh, Johnny, I was going to tell you—I thought you and Ben Hardin were friends?"

"We are," he said gruffly.

"Then it must be me," she simpered. "I must be getting awfully popular, Johnny. You know, Ben was here this morning, telling me how hard up you are, and how you'd never amount to anything. He said why didn't I find some prosperous rancher to keep company with! I suppose he meant himself."

Denver was on his feet, glaring down at her, and the girl's giggling broke off abruptly. "He said that? You're sure Ben Hardin told you that?"

Sally flinched at the new grim note in Denver's voice. "Why, of course, he said

it. But you needn't worry, Johnny. You know I've always liked you best."

"I gotta be going," Denver choked abruptly. He swung up on the calico and spurred the startled cayuse into the trail, leaving Sally staring incredulously after him.

"Of all the underhanded, snaky, double-crossin' tricks!" Denver snarled. "By God, I wouldn't have thought it of Ben. Maybe Sally—but shucks, she ain't a liar, anyway."

The burning resentment mounted and grew in him. He realized suddenly that Sally Kenyon was silly and pretty stupid. But she was more than that now. She had become an issue, a point of pride with him. Hell, he didn't want her, never had. But if Ben Hardin thought he could horn into the game thataway . . .

His flare of temper had not died down when he rounded a turn in the trail to find Kurt Shard waiting for him.

"I thought yuh said yuh was ridin' into town," Denver threw at him.

"I waited for yuh," Shard grinned. "I got a little business deal to talk over with yuh. Yuh savvy now what I meant, back there?"

"I savvy plenty," Denver snapped. "I reckon we won't go into that, Kurt."

"All right, Denver, all right. But don't light into Ben too hard. Hell, he's all right, jest a kid yet. Fellers do funny things when they begin swingin' a loop fer a woman."

"I thought yuh said yuh had some business to talk over," Denver injected quietly. "Wal, let's have it. I don't feel like much palaverin' right now."

"Sure, Denver." Shard lifted his left hand and stroked his chin. A finger was missing from that hand; Denver remembered the occasion when a careless toss had caught Shard's hand in a rope and a plunging steer had done the rest.

"How'd yuh like to sell out, Johnny? I'm able tuh offer yuh a good figger, and besides that, I'll give yuh a job ridin' fer th' Slash K again."

"Yuh? Yuh want to buy me out?" Denver stared. "If Kenyon wants my spread why'd yuh hide out here to make th' offer? Why didn't yuh mention it back at the ranch? Far as that goes, why didn't Kenyon ask me himself?

"Shucks, I didn't say I was buyin' fer Kenyon, did I?" Shard drawled. "I could be actin' fer someone else, couldn't I?"

Denver thought rapidly. "Kenyon don't want or need any more range, I know that. Who are yuh dealin' for, Shard?"

"I ain't at liberty to tell," Shard grinned. "How about it, anyway?"

Denver shook his head. "I ain't sellin'. I'm doin' all right by myself."

"Wal, if that's final, it's yore own funeral," Shard commented. "But I'd advise yuh to take thet offer. Next one may not be so high. Yuh know, a lot of fellers thet didn't want to sell out changed their minds later on."

Denver's eyes slitted and his lean body stiffened. "That a threat, Shard?"

The Slash K man spread his hands. "Not from me. But as I say, I ain't runnin' things. I'm jest givin' yuh a bit of friendly advice, thet's all."

"Wal, I ain't sellin', and yuh can carry th' warnin' along that it's gonna be damn' unhealthy for th' hombre that tries to change my mind!"

Shard shrugged again and turned away. Denver headed toward his own shack with this new problem running through his mind. Who'd want to buy him out? No big rancher would want his spread without wanting Hardin's, too. The thought made him pause. Ben had money that a relative in the East had recently left him. Was it possible that Ben—but in that case Ben would have come directly to him. It wasn't like him to lurk behind an agent. Still,

It hadn't been like Hardin to pull what he had at the Slash K, either.

Denver thrust the thought aside and rode toward the bank of Bearpaw Creek, intending to follow it down to the trail that crossed to his ranch house. He hoped Blackie would have grub ready, for his seventeen-year-old kid brother was getting to be quite a hand.

Then Denver yanked in so abruptly that the outraged Calico reared back on his haunches with an angry squeal. Where yesterday Bearpaw Creek had been running a sizable stream, now only a lessening trickle of muddy water flowed. Denver cursed savagely, sat staring at the phenomenon. He glared up toward the hills a few miles away where the stream's headwaters were. As suspicion struck him he roweled the calico and set off at a reckless pace up the bank of the creek.

A half hour had passed before he pressed into the low rolling hills and instinctively slowed his gait. A clump of cottonwoods loomed before him, gaunt and impressive in the approaching twilight. Denver spurred through, and reined in sharply.

There before him was a crude but effective dam built of logs, rocks and mud. And the dam had choked off the course of Bearpaw Creek, deflecting it into an older, higher channel that ran straight through the heart of Ben Hardin's holdings! More than that, Hardin himself was out on the dam, peering down at the mass of tree limbs and mud.

On the soft turf of the bank Denver's calico made no sound. Not until the shadow of the horse fell across him did Hardin glance up into Denver's livid face. He grinned, and Denver's hand jerked savagely.

"Yuh doublecrossin' sidewinder!" Denver spat, "what's th' idea of this? Damn yuh, first yuh try to cut me out with Sally, then yuh want to hog all th' water so's I'll sell out to yuh. Well, I'll see you in hades first!"

Ben Hardin's expression altered swiftly. "That tongue of yores shore wants to run away, Johnny," he said softly. "I ain't takin' that talk from no one, not even you!"

"What're yuh aimin' to do about it?" sneered Denver. "I'm tellin' yuh to toss yore rope over them logs an' snake 'em out o' there pronto! Yuh ain't got any right to hog this water, and yuh know it!"

"Suppose I tell yuh thet I was just about to do that?" Hardin asked slowly.

"I'd call yuh a dirty liar!" Denver retorted. His flaming temper had taken complete possession of him now, and all thoughts of friendship had faded away before this treachery. He snatched forth the heavy .45 and lined the black barrel on Hardin's shirt front.

"I'm givin' yuh ten seconds to begin work," Denver stated harshly. "If yuh haven't started bustin' up that dam then, I'm gonna put a slug right through yore sneakin' hide!"

Hardin stared at him sardonically. "Go ahead, count," he said contemptuously. "Yo're so damn' bull-haided no one can tell yuh anything! I was gonna rip 'er out, but since yo're makin' this play, I'm jest curious to see if yuh'll go through with it!"

For a moment the men stared unflinchingly at each other. Then Denver swore bitterly, jammed the Colt back into the holster. He swung down, unbuckled the belt and let it fall to the ground.

"Yuh knew damn' well I wouldn't shoot in cold blood," he said slowly. "But that ain't gonna keep me from beating yore lyin' face in. There's just one thing I want to ask yuh: Did yuh tell Sally Kenyon a lot of lies about me this afternoon?"

Hardin tossed his own belt aside. "I reckon I did," he said coolly. "Now come on, yuh wild-eyed fire-eater, an' have some sense lammed into yore thick head!"

Denver snarled, slammed his fist at the

other's face. Hardin partially ducked the blow, countered with a stunning left to Denver's jaw. For a moment both men stood toe to toe, all thoughts of defense forgotten, intent only on pounding home punishing blows.

Hardin, heavier and taller, had an advantage in height and reach that Denver's lithe speed and agility compensated for. The grass became trampled and slippery, and both men lunged, slipped, swore and bore in for more. Denver stumbled as he surged in after a crushing uppercut, and the misstep threw him headlong into Hardin's next blow. For a second the little glade swam before his eyes, and shooting pain roared through his aching head.

He shook himself impatiently, tried to steady the dancing shape before him that was Ben Hardin. He threw himself forward, swinging his left fist in a final desperate blow. He was aware of a sharp pain in his hand, of a dull crunch followed by a thud. Then he sprawled gasping upon the ground.

When he opened his eyes Hardin was dragging himself toward his saddle. A sudden ache filled Denver's brain. He had never seen Ben like this before—blood streaming down his face, one eye closed and swollen. But it was the white, set expression on his face that gripped Denver. He struggled to his feet.

"If yuh'll get up, an' toss a look over that top log we'll snake this dam outa here," Hardin said harshly. "I ain't gonna do it alone."

Without a word Johnny staggered to his saddle and shook out his reata. In silence they worked, and a few minutes later the horses had ripped the dam apart and Bearpaw Creek resumed its interrupted course. Denver mounted and turned to face Hardin. At that moment the right word might have saved the situation, but neither wanted to be first. Hardin's face was twitching, probably with pain, but to Denver it looked like a mocking grin. He picked up the calico's reins.

"After this, Hardin, see that yore stock stays on yore side of th' creek," he ordered curtly.

Hardin flung him a scornful glance. "Denver, if any of yore mulies cross to my side I'll shoot 'em to hell!"

They rode off silently then. Denver approached his cabin with a tangled storm of emotion churning in his brain. Blackie came to meet him, staring at his brother in amazement. Blackie, save for his crop of black hair, seemed a younger, smaller replica of Denver. The latter grinned bleakly at the kid.

"Golly, yuh shore look like yuh tied into a catamount!" Blackie exclaimed.

Denver told him briefly what had happened. When he finished the boy's youthful face was sober.

"What's got into Ben?" he demanded loyally.

Denver shrugged. "Listen, kid, whatever happens, I want you to keep out of it. But yuh'd better keep an eye on the Bearpaw from now on. Hardin threatened to shoot any of our stock that crossed over."

"I'd shore admire tuh see him do it," Blackie declared. "Golly, Johnny, this is gonna be a shore-enough range war, ain't it?"

Denver thought of that, later, in his bunk. It would be a range war, none the less bitter because only two would take part in it. For the first time he managed to go over the day coolly. He remembered with a pang of pain that he owed his life to Ben Hardin. Shucks, he couldn't forget that too easily. And as far as Sally Kenyon was concerned, she didn't matter. She had ceased to be a pawn in the game.

Hell, maybe he'd acted too tough with Ben. Hardin had a temper, too, on occasion. Should he go to Ben, smooth things over? He had half decided to do that when three sharp rifle shots rang out, seeming to echo from the direction of the creek.

If Ben had shot any Circle D cows—the thought swept all idea of compromise from Denver's mind, and sent him hurrying into his clothes. He met Blackie at the door. The kid's face was half scared, half eager.

"Yo're stayin' here," Denver ordered curtly.

"Th' dickens I am!" Blackie asserted. "If our cows are bein' shot I guess it's my play, too!"

He was out and ready, so Denver threw saddles on a pair of mounts in the bronc corral, his fingers strangely clumsy in the seething rage that was rising in his chest. They had mounted and were striking off toward the creek when a hail came from the town trail, and a rider loomed up. Denver recognized Kurt Shard.

"What's up?" the Slash K segundo demanded. "I was jest ridin' home from town when I heard shots. Sounded down that way."

He pointed toward the creek. "If it's what I reckon," Denver snarled, "it's a coyote killin' some o' my stock. We're takin' a look-see."

"Who'd do that ?" Shard scoffed. "Yuh mean Ben Hardin? He wouldn't pull anything like that, Denver. Reckon yo're barkin' up th' wrong tree."

"He wouldn't?" Denver snapped. "Wal, he's low enough to dam th' creek an' try to starve me out for water. An' he threatened to kill any Circle D beef that crossed the line!"

Shard slapped a chap-clad leg. "Wal, I'll jest go along with yuh, Denver. An' I don't mind tellin' yuh now it was Hardin who wanted me to buy yuh out, act as his agent. But if he's pulled somethin' like this, I'm all washed up, and I'll tell him so. Hell, I ain't aimin' to start no range war! Old Man Kenyon would beef me if I got th' Slash K mixed up in this!"

Ten minutes later they were splashing through the recovered stream and searching the farther bank. Denver was prepared for what he saw at last on Hardin's side of the stream. Three prime Circle D cows lay there stiffening, and a coyote slunk into the shadows as the riders came up. Denver leaned over them, his eyes going bleak as he noted the bullet hole in each head. He swung back stiffly into the saddle.

"I'm havin' it out with Ben right now," he gritted.

It was a scant five miles to the rough, one room cabin that Hardin used as a dwelling. As the three rode up the moon drifted out and bathed the scene in a flood of silver. They dismounted some distance away from the building and approached quietly on foot. The place was completely dark, the windows staring out like the vacant eyes of a corpse. At the door Denver called out harshly:

"Come on out, Ben! I wanta talk to yuh!"

There was a stir inside the cabin, then Ben Hardin's sleepy voice. "What'd yuh want, Denver? Won't it keep 'til mornin'?"

"Yuh damn' coyote, come out, or I'm comin' in after yuh!" Denver lashed out.

Blackie suddenly shoved Denver aside and went up to the door. "I'll go in an' drag him out!" he cried in boyish bravado.

He grasped the latch, started to swing the door. Simultaneously from within the cabin came a shattering gunshot.

A long sliver of wood peeled from the door, and a round hole appeared in it magically. And Blackie Denver gasping brokenly, turned slowly on his heels and pitched forward. A dark blot formed on his shirt front, spread swiftly into a huge scarlet patch.

"Johnny! Johnny!—I'm—done—for!" Blackie gasped those five short words as he died.

A horrible nightmare paralysis held Denver in a vise-like grip. Dazedly, he knew that Blackie was dead, that Ben Hardin had fired through the door and killed him. Yet for a brief interval the thought held

no clear significance. He was startled by Shard's savage curse, "Th' devil's gunned th' kid!"

A mad fury seized Denver, swept him into a crimson flood of passion. He hammered on the door savagely until his hands were bruised and bleeding. As he wheeled to dart toward the back, Shard flung himself on him and bore him down.

"Yuh fool!" the Slash K boss snarled, "if yuh show yoreself past them windows he'll pick yuh off in this moonlight like a damn' jackrabbit!"

Shard dragged the cursing Denver back into the shadows just as a flurry of hoofbeats rang out in Hardin's horse corral. They caught a fleeting glimpse of him bending low over the neck of a saddleless horse, and Denver knew dully that Hardin had run out the back door and, hugging the shadows of the cottonwoods, had reached a mount.

"Come on!" Denver raged. "Come on! We've got to catch that murderin' dog—"

"We'll take a look inside first," Shard roared. "He mighta had someone with him."

He plunged in through the open back door with Denver at his heels. Johnny scratched a match, and saw at a glance that the room was empty. Five minutes later they were spurring through the night in close pursuit of the shadowy figure of Hardin riding ahead of them.

The trail led toward town, and for a time they kept the fugitive in sight. Then in a stretch of rocky going Hardin eluded them. Shard rode on to Mesa to notify Smoky Glass, the sheriff, and Denver turned slowly back to the cabin of Hardin.

It was dawn when he had laid Blackie on his bed at home. That dawn saw the transition of Johnny Denver from a fun-loving youngster to a hard, cruel-eyed man with one burning purpose—vengeance.

Before noon he had, alone, buried Blackie and stood above the grave while a silent oath ran through his mind. At twelve he had ridden off on the calico, provisions behind the cantle.

In the four days that followed Denver grew gaunt and grim-faced with weariness, yet by sheer will power he maintained the search. He knew that Glass had two posses out, and that a deputy was guarding Hardin's cabin in the event that the fugitive should return. But it was Denver, after all, who found him.

He came riding into a tiny box canyon at the end of the fourth day, not five miles from Mesa. And Ben Hardin was there, flung wearily before a tiny campfire, with his dejected horse standing nearby.

"Hardin!" Denver didn't recognize that voice as his own. Ben turned, rose slowly to his feet. For a moment they stared deep into each other's eyes, swayed from hunger and sleeplessness, yet were sustained by a greater force.

"Yuh killed Blackie, Hardin," Denver droned. "I'm countin' five, then I'm shootin! One!"

"I didn't kill Blackie," Hardin said evenly. "I swear it, Johnny."

"Yuh were alone in th' cabin," Denver accused. "Yuh were alone, an' th' shot came from inside, came through th' door. Ain't that so?"

"I was alone," Hardin admitted steadily. "But I didn't kill him! Th' shot must have come through the window!"

"Th' windows was all closed," Denver murmured. "They was closed, an' no hole in any of 'em. I looked. Don't talk any more, Ben. Just be ready. I'm givin' yuh a chance, more than yuh give th' kid. Two . . . three . . . four . . ."

A flatly determined voice cut through the second's silence. "I've got yuh both covered, gents! I wouldn't count any further, Denver."

Denver turned slowly. Sheriff Smoky Glass was behind him, guns leveled. A half dozen armed members of the posse crowded behind him.

"He killed Blackie," said Denver in a dull, deadly voice. "I gotta know he'll hang, else I ain't turnin' him over to yuh."

Glass came forward. He was a slight, mild-faced man whose wistful expression belied his record as a lawman.

"He'll hang, Denver," he said slowly. "With what we've got on him, he'll hang. It'll be better that way."

Denver wearily sheathed his gun as Smoky Glass disarmed Ben Hardin and snapped on handcuffs. "If yuh let him get away, Sheriff, if he don't hang . . ." Denver did not finish the sentence, but the cold death in his voice made even the hard-bitten little sheriff blink.

They rode off toward Mesa, the posse with Ben Hardin in their midst. Denver turned toward home, drooped in the attitude of a man whose task is finished, yet not entirely to his satisfaction. At his own cabin he slept for a fitful hour or two, then rose and rode toward Hardin's shack.

Something inexplicable drove him, something he couldn't fathom urged him back to that macabre spot. He remembered that there was a rifle of his in Hardin's cabin, a gun he had loaned Ben before the trouble started. That made an excuse; he'd go get the gun.

It was completely dark when he drew near the shack, but a lamp was lighted inside, and the deputy who was on duty squatted, smoking, in the doorway. The sound of hoofs came from behind Denver, and instinctively he drew aside into a clump of bushes as Kurt Shard rode by. Shard dismounted before the shack, and answered the deputy's sharp challenge.

"Yuh can go now, Pete," the Slash K foreman called. "They got Hardin three hours ago. Glass asked me to stop an' tell yuh."

Shard paused to light a cigarette, then motioned toward his horse. "I got a quart of red-eye in th' saddle pocket, Pete. Want a drink?"

The deputy accepted enthusiastically. As the lawman's back was turned, Denver saw Shard step quickly inside the cabin. In a moment he reappeared, and the deputy and major-domo rode away into the darkness.

Instantly Denver stepped inside and relighted the lamp. He stood a moment, staring around the room. Hardin had a taste for comfort and appearance. Robes and bearskins covered the walls, and a neat rack of guns was over the fireplace. Among them Denver saw his own loaned Winchester. He took it down, stared at it absently. Suddenly he started, gazing intently at the stock. He replaced the gun, and spent an hour going over the room. When he finished he knew his first startling suspicion had been true!

Five seconds later he swung the calico toward Mesa, riding slowly, mulling over what he had discovered. God! It must be true! He had to see Ben Hardin, had to talk to him! He spurred the calico into a sweeping run.

When he reached Mesa the jail was dark, save for one lamp's dim flickering. There must be someone there. Possibly Glass was dozing in the gloom. Denver tried the door and found it locked. Fear gripped him, fear that something was wrong. He called out, and before the echoes died away slammed his iron body against the barrier. On the second assault the ancient lock gave way and Denver stumbled into the outer office. He reached for the lamp, turned its wick high.

Then he saw Smoky Glass, tied and gagged, half in a chair, half bent over the desk. Denver ripped the gag away.

"What's happened?" cried Johnny hoarsely. "Sheriff, what's the play?"

Glass spat, glared furiously at Denver, his mildness all gone. "Damn yuh, Johnny Denver, yuh know! I'll get yuh for this lynchin' if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"What lynchin'? Hell's fire, man, talk sense!"

"Yuh can't sneak back an' lie your way outa it!" Glass snarled. "Jest untie my hands an' I'll take care of yuh! Yuh come in here not half an hour ago, masked, with four cronies. Yuh jumped me, then took Ben Hardin out tuh lynch him! By God, no lynchers can get away with that on Smoky Glass!"

"God!" Denver's face was white, twisted with emotion. "It wasn't me, Sheriff!"

"Wal, th' ringleader was dressed like yuh, an' th' others called him Denver," Glass barked. "Untie me, damn' yuh! They rode outa the west end. I'll get a posse. . . ."

"Yo're stayin' tied 'til someone finds yuh," Denver snapped. "Yuh ain't hornin' in this time, Glass!"

He pounded out, reached the hull in one leap. The calico whirled under the iron pressure of the reins, and thundered out of Mesa with spurs raking both tender flanks.

Denver pressed forward, his face twisted and desperate in the sudden moonlight. God! If he was too late! If it had already happened, he'd never get over this night's work as long as he lived. A half mile from town he saw that a half dozen hard-ridden horses had swung from the trail. Even in the tricky moonlight the trail from here was not difficult to follow. He led along a grassy swale, cut finally toward a grove of cottonwoods. And in there a faint flicker of light twinkled.

Johnny jumped from his saddle and ran awkwardly forward, half stumbling in high-heeled boots. There in the center of the grove, six men were grouped about a small fire.

One man, Ben Hardin, was mounted, and a rope ran round his neck, over a cottonwood branch. Its end was held by a tall man whose light hair gleamed in the firelight.

Kurt Shard said, "We're swingin' yuh now, Hardin, because yuh murdered Blackie Denver, and we're friends of Johnny's."

"That bein' th' case, Shard," Denver stepped smoothly forward, "seems yuh might have invited me tuh th' party!"

Shard wheeled, his eyes watchful. "Howdy, Denver. Figgered we'd take this job off yore hands."

Ben Hardin grinned recklessly. "So yuh couldn't stay away, Johnny. Yuh jest couldn't miss seein' yore pard stretched!"

"Why, no," Denver said with deceptive gentleness, "I reckon it ain't that, Ben."

Magically a gun was in his hand, weaving, covering the five would-be lynchers.

"I don't think there'll be a necktie party, boys," Denver went on. "Unbuckle yore belts an' drop 'em in a pile. That's it. Not yuh, Shard. Yuh keep yores, but drop that rope. All right, Ben, take th' rope off."

"What's this play?" Shard demanded silkily. "I thought yuh wanted Blackie's murderer punished!"

"He's gonna be," Denver half whispered. "Ben, did Shard call on yuh th' night of th' killin'?"

"Yes," Hardin answered, wonderingly. "He came in, palavered a few minutes."

"An' were yuh there all the time?"

"I went out to feed th' saddle stock," said Hardin, "that's all."

"An' yuh remember that rifle I let yuh take? Yuh said yuh'd refinish the stock for me? When did yuh do that?"

"Why, I'd jest finished when Shard came in," Hardin replied. "What's it mean, Johnny?"

Denver didn't answer the question. He had turned on Shard, and his lashing voice held the Slash K segundo stiffly, "Shard, yuh killed Blackie!"

"That's a lie!" Shard shot back swiftly. "Are yuh drunk, Denver? I was with yuh, outside. An' th' shot came from inside!"

"Just the same, yuh killed him! Only yuh meant it fer me!" Denver said.

"I'm gonna tell yuh how, Shard, and I want Ben to know, too. At some time or other, yuh'd noticed that the rifles on the fireplace rack in Ben's cabin cover the middle of th' door! The rack is out from the wall, an' the door is almost at the corner of the room. So, while Ben was out, yuh run a string from the trigger of th' Winchester over th' peg and under the robes on the wall around to the latch. Then yuh levered a cartridge into the chamber, and yore trap was all set! Yuh knew that Ben always used th' other door himself, an' yuh were careful to leave that way. Th' chances were a thousand to one against anyone comin' to the front door before we did. And Ben, in that dim light, naturally didn't notice the gun was cocked, or see the hidden string!"

"That's it!" Ben Hardin burst out. "When Blackie pulled the latch that rifle plugged him, shot right through the door! And th' gun was solid enough on the rack so the recoil couldn't knock it off."

"A fine story!" Shard jeered, "but why pin it on me? Why couldn't Hardin have done thet same trick?"

"Because, Shard, Ben had just stained that gun stock. I looked at it tonight, and the mark of yore hand is on it! Yeah, the stain dried around your hand print—and it shows yore crippled hand, Shard, the one with th' finger gone!"

Kurt Shard wasted no more time on denials. For a split-second it seemed that Denver had looked aside . . . and Shard flashed his gun.

Denver was leaping swiftly sidewise, the .45 in his hand thundering. Shard fired once, hastily, and missed. His second shot knocked Denver's hat from his head. Squalling like a trapped animal, Shard saw certain death in Denver's eyes, and braced himself for a third shot. It came, not from his gun, but from Denver's Colt.

A smile twitched at Denver's mouth as he fired three times, the explosions merging. A black spot appeared on Shard's forehead, joined by two more. The man's head dropped; he took three tottering steps, buckled to his knees and fell.

Behind him one of his men dove for his discarded gunbelt, and cursed as Denver's bullet clipped his arm. Then Sheriff Glass surged into the cottonwoods with a half dozen men behind him. . . .

Riding home, Ben said softly, "I wanta tell yuh, Johnny, why I run yuh down to Sally. I wanted yuh to drop her, get rid of her, fer I knew she was no good. An' th' dam; I didn't build it. Shard must have, just to cause trouble."

Denver nodded soberly. "Just as he shot them cows of mine before riding up to th' house. Way I figger it, Shard wanted Sally, *an'* our spreads. He tried to buy yuh out, too, didn't he, Ben? And when we wouldn't bite on his story, he thought the only way he could get both things he wanted was to get rid of us. He figgered th' gun trick would dispose of me, an' that yuh'd be hung for murder.

"He prob'ly got the string that fired th' gun when we rushed in after the shootin', but he didn't have a chance to get the empty cartridge from the chamber until tonight. I saw him in there, an' got suspicious. He even tried to make Glass think I was leadin' th' lynchers. Those Slash K cronies of his likely figgered yuh were th' real murderer and deserved stringin' up. Glass'll turn 'em loose when he straightens that out."

"I been thinkin'," Hardin proposed after a long moment of silence, "why not throw our spreads in together—be pardners?"

Johnny Denver nodded soberly. "We'll do that. Then there won't be no deadlines. . . . I been a crazy fool, Ben." He held out his hand.

"Forget it, hombre," said Hardin gruffly, as he grasped Johnny's hand. "We're pards now."

THE SKUNK WAGON

By WESTMORELAND GRAY

The Most Prominent Citizens Of Maguey Gulch Lived Not By The Sweat Of Their Brows But By The Smoke Of Their Guns. But That Was Before Latigo Carroll Came To Town With The Strangest Vehicle The Range Had Ever Seen . . .

The cowtown of Maguey Gulch was a row of drab weather-blackened pine buildings along a single twisting sun-baked street. In the edge of the savage badlands, its false-fronted structures squatted against a towering hundred-foot cliff and stared sullenly out over barren hills, just as most of its inhabitants squatted against its pine walls and stared out just as sullenly.

Maguey Gulch suffered from the blight of little energy. It could afford this because its most prominent citizens were men of the owlhoot gentry and lived not by the sweat of their brows, but by the smoke of their guns. The rest of the population was composed of their bootlickers and hangers-on.

But today the loungers on the saloon front sat up and took notice. There was something new under the sun. Turning into the street in the scorching late afternoon sun was the queerest vehicle any of them had ever seen.

Drawn by two rangy dun horses was what had once been a serviceable buckboard, but was now grotesquely converted. On the bed of it had been built of stout mesquite poles, firmly notched and anchored and braced together, a big cage about five feet high and as long and wide as the bed of the buckboard. Driving this weird contraption was a tall lean-hipped man of about twenty-five who looked as if he were out of place. He was. Latigo Carroll was a tophand cowboy and he belonged in the saddle whenever he traveled.

In a swirl of dust the queer vehicle drew up at the hitching pole in front of the saloon. A shout went up and instantly a curious crowd had gathered around for a closer look. Even Tequila Joe Jenkins, owner of the saloon and something of a boss in Maguey Gulch came out to stare and deride.

"Wa-al, wa-al!" exclaimed Tequila Joe. "What in hell's hocks would an hombre want to haul in that there contraption?" Tequila Joe was tall and dark. His face was deeply lined and he had cold gray eyes. His soft hands were fish-belly white. He wore a fifty-dollar mouse-colored velour Stetson, a wide-checked vest which was further distinguished by a heavy gold chain across it.

"It ain't for haulin' yearlin's, because they locomote better on hoofs. Must be for haulin' hawgs, huh, stranger?"

The stranger had climbed leisurely down from his perch and was lighting a quirley. "It ain't for hawgs," he drawled, eying Tequila Joe steadily over the glowing

tip of his cigarette. "It's for skunks!"

Tequila Joe gave a derisive snort. "Who in hell'd wanta haul skunks? Besides, it wouldn't hold skunks. Th' poles is too far apart."

"Not for the kinda skunks I aim to haul."

Suddenly the banter went out of the whole affair. Tequila stiffened and saw that the stranger was deadly serious. Latigo had stood erect and was sweeping the crowd with his cold gaze. There was threat in that look and a gripping tension took hold of the group.

"What kinda skunks you aim to haul?" Tequila asked quietly.

"Two-legged skunks. Five o' the most prominent ones in Maguey Gulch."

Tequila's eyes darkened. He felt acutely alert and a premonition nagged at him. This hombre was hitting close to home now. Tequila stared at him, noted that he wore no weapons at his thighs.

"Where to you aimin' to haul these skunks?" A challenging edge was on Tequila's voice.

"Back to Sierra Rojo on the Pecos, where they's a law an' where they'll hang for killin' my boss, Long Jim Rotan," Latigo Carroll's voice lashed back viciously. "They thought he had the ranch payroll on him, that's why they shot him. But they didn't do a good job. They left him for dead, but he lived long enough to tell who they was. He knowed 'em—every son of 'em, cause Long Jim tried to run a spread down in these hell-lands four years back!"

The crowd shifted uneasily, spreading a little away from Tequila. He blanched for an instant, then his face suffused with anger. His hand fell down and caressed the stag handle of his gun. The center of all eyes was transferred now from the odd vehicle to Tequila and the stranger.

Tequila said softly: "Just how was yuh gonna get these gents to enter yore—yore skunk-wagon?"

Latigo Carroll relaxed. "I ain't plumb figured yet. First off I aim to read out their names, open the cage door and invite 'em to come in, any of 'em present. It'd shore save me a lot o' trouble!"

Tequila gave a loud guffaw and a titter ran through the group. Latigo took a small slip of paper from his vest pocket and began to read in a loud voice. "Here's the names o' the gents what murdered my boss: Hoss Stivers, hoss-thief, rustler and so-called sheriff o' Maguey Gulch!" The men there gasped at the sheer nerve of the man. As he called that first name Latigo walked back and unlocked the heavy padlock on the puncheon door of the big cage, threw the door open.

He returned to lean against the front of the buckboard. "Sam Hulbert, runnin' thuh Box G ranch fer a blind, while he steals and robs and kills. Big Fist Blodgett, his hired gunman. Finis Cain, Horse Stivers ditto. And Mr. Tequila Joe Jenkins, owner o'—"

Tequila Joe jumped forward and shoved his face into Latigo's; his hand gripped his gun, his eyes flashing. "Yuh damn fourflusher!" he snarled. "Yuh lyin' coyote, how yuh aimin' to make me git into that there contraption?"

Latigo eyed him mildly, nonchalantly leaning back, arm over the footboard of the wagon. "Easy, there, Mr. Tequila. Don't rush. I'd prefer for the gents to enter in the order named. Besides, there's a gent right behind yuh. An' if I ain't mistaken he's the one whose name was called first."

Pushing through the crowd and shoving Tequila Joe aside was a tall, ugly, lean-faced man with coal black bushy brows and glowering eyes. He had a star on his vest and a snarl on his face.

"I'm Horse Stivers," he rasped out explosively. "An' I'm sheriff here. What in

hell yuh mean by them damn-fool things yo're sayin'?"

"Thank yuh, sheriff," Latigo murmured. His voice was civil, his face composed, but there was a steely glitter in his eyes. "Thank yuh fer comin' right up. Just go right in the door at the back o' the cage."

The sheriff cursed furiously. He twisted aside in a spasm of motion and his hand slapped down for the gun at his thigh. The big .45 cleared leather and came up. There was a bellowing explosion, as Latigo Carroll straightened, bringing his hand from under the buckboard seat, his six-gun filling it and belching deadly flame. The gun flew from Horse Stivers' hand. His wrist was shattered by the bullet and blood gushed down over his gnarled fingers. Stivers moaned in agony and gripped his arm.

Latigo's gun surveyed the crowd, including Tequila Joe Jenkins. "Two o' you hombres tie up Stivers' arm an' dump him through that cage door," the cowboy ordered in a deadly voice. Two men moved with alacrity to obey. Latigo locked the big padlock and put the key in his pocket.

"There's the first skunk!" Latigo announced. "Now, I don't wanta hurt no innocent bystanders. But if any o' yuh take a notion to stop bein' innocent, yuh might also stop bein' bystanders, sabe? Clear out o' here pronto, an' if I see one o' yuh within ten feet o' this here skunk wagon—get ready to dodge lead!"

Latigo unhitched the two duns and led them away to stake them out. But the grotesque vehicle remained there in front of the saloon with the moaning, snarling, half-berserk Stivers peering out from behind the mesquite bars. Latigo never got far from it. He ate supper in the sorry Maguey Gulch restaurant, but sat near the open door with an eye on the wagon.

Meanwhile a seething undercurrent of excitement ran through the town. Word of the arrival of the brash stranger and of Sheriff Stivers' predicament spread. Men tread softly and spoke in whispers when in the vicinity of Latigo Carroll. And Latigo was sure that the news would reach the other men he wanted, Sam Hulbert, Big Fist Blodgett and Finis Cain.

At nine o'clock Latigo boldly entered Tequila Joe's saloon. Tequila stood back and did not offer objection of any sort. Latigo knew he was waiting for something. Waiting for the others to come. Then would come concerted action.

Latigo sat down at a poker table where he could look out the front door, and he asked two of the habitués to join him in a game of penny ante. Latigo was wearing two guns now, on crossed belts, swung low and tied down. And he wore them as if they belonged there.

The game did not last long. The batwing doors slammed open and three men barged through them. Latigo knew he was staring at the men he wanted. And he was staring at something else. Two bores of drawn six guns.

"All right!" the big man in the middle barked—that would be Sam Hulbert. "Yo're the hombre what's gonna put us in yore skunk-wagon. Why don't yuh start puttin'?"

The little thin hombre on Hulbert's left was Finis Cain. The slat-built one on his right, with the wolfish grin and huge hands, was Big Fist Blodgett. Both were known as deadly gunmen.

Latigo stood up, swung his hands noticeably away from his guns. He was an inch from death, and he knew it. "I did kinda aim to, gents," he answered mildly. "I made a start at it. Look out there in front an' yuh see the sheriff—"

"Yeah!" Hulbert jeered. "Turn our heads an' let yuh get the drop, huh? That old stunt is dead with the dry-rot. Listen, stranger. Yuh stuck yore head into somethin' yuh can't get it out of here in Maguey Gulch. Now fork over th' key to that air fool outfit!"

Tequila Joe's voice cut in from behind Latigo. "An' if their guns ain't enough to satisfy yuh, cowboy, turn yore head an' yuh can see my six aimed between yore shoulder blades!"

Latigo shrugged sadly. "That bein' thuh case—" He dug down in his chaps pocket and brought forth a shiny key.

Hulbert strode forth to take it. "All right, Tequila. Put yore gun square in his back an' take charge o' him till we git Horse Stivers outta that crazy-buggy. Then we'll gut-shoot this here galoot into little pieces."

Latigo felt the snout of Tequila's six-gun against the small of his back. The three others went barging out the front door and on to where the bizarre skunk-wagon stood.

"March ahead to the door an' see the job well done," Tequila ordered mockingly, as he drew both of Latigo's guns from the rear and prodded Latigo ahead.

Gathered around the rear end of the converted buckboard, Hulbert and his two companions were busy working at the heavy lock. Stivers was snarling curses and dire threats.

Hulbert expelled a vivid oath. "I can't get the damn thing unlocked!"

Latigo Carroll drawled from the saloon door: "Ugh—oh, if that's what yo're tryin' to do, that ain't the key to it. I disremember just what I done with thuh right key!"

All three men cursed, spun around and dug for their guns. But Latigo had become a cyclone of action. Whipping abruptly aside, he kicked up his heel backward with all his might. It caught Tequila Joe in the groin, knocked him off balance. His gun roared, but the bullet only raked Latigo across the ribs and ripped a hole in his vest. One long leap along the wall sent Latigo's lean body hurling into the shadows.

The guns of the trio at the wagon began barking like the snarl of angry dogs, flashing vividly, smashing into the rough pine about and beside Latigo. The cowboy dropped low, whirled and scuttled across the wooden walk. The move disconcerted his foes and it was a second before their guns could find him.

By then he had leaped clear of the walk and was diving for the men's three horses, two doors down from the saloon. He noted that one of them stood without being tethered. Latigo made a flying mount. He jabbed the spurs deep, and the horse plunged away in fright.

Howls of rage went up behind him. Latigo glanced back, saw them running after him afoot, fanning guns at top speed. The cowboy hit the place where a little lane crossed the street, veered at right angles, and the next instant had the corner of a building between him and his pursuers. He leaped out of the saddle without slowing the animal's stride, slapped it with all his might as it charged away, and sent it stampeding on in the gloom.

He dropped flat on his stomach and rolled under the edge of the building, just as Tequila, Hulbert and the other two hurled themselves around the corner.

Dimly they saw the horse galloping away. The drum of its hoofs came back to them as it raced for the brush.

The men drew up, Tequila still groaning with pain. "Hell, let him go," Hulbert growled. "Damn good riddance. That wasn't much of a cayuse nohow. Reckon that fool hombre has got his bellyful o' Maguey Gulch. He won't never come back. Get an ax, Tequila, and we'll chop hell outa that contraption an' let Hoss Stivers out."

Hulbert, Big Fist Blodgett and the little Cain swung back onto the wooden walk and clumped back toward the fan of light in front of the saloon. They did not know that Tequila Joe had turned sick from the kick Latigo had given him. He leaned against the dark building wall there, feeling faint. Eighteen inches away, under the edge of the building, Latigo Carroll's hand closed over a heavy rock.

Back at the sheriff's rolling prison, the three men stopped and waited for Tequila, Stivers complaining loudly at his continued humiliating duress.

"What in hell's keepin' Tequila?" Big Fist demanded. "He musta gone a long ways for that there ax!"

"Go back and see about him," Hulbert ordered.

Blodgett strode away. He searched the area at the side of the building where they had left Tequila, but returned without news. "Reckon he got sick from that kick an' went somewhere to lay down," he grumbled. "Thought he looked kinda green around th' gills. I'll step back in th' saloon an' get an ax."

Big Fist was gone but a minute or two. He came back with a shining double-bitted ax. Hulbert grasped it and swung it high, to bring down on the corner mesquite bar of the cage. "Stand away, Hoss," he called to the imprisoned sheriff, "so's yuh won't get hurt."

A gun roared, shattering the night. A slug *gonged* against the ax blade, and the hickory handle flew from Hulbert's hands.

From the awning of the saloon just above them came a cool voice: "It ain't right and proper, Hulbert, to damage other folks' property!"

The three men below leaped apart twisting around, and stared up. Latigo Carroll crouched up there with a smoking gun in his hand. He had climbed up from the corner building after knocking out Tequila.

The trio below whipped out their guns and let loose a savage salvo. But Latigo had already wheeled about, flung up a window in the front upper room of the saloon building and leaped through.

"Now we got him!" Hulbert shouted triumphantly. "He's gone into the saloon. We'll go through and up the back stairs and smoke him out! Stay out here to head him off, Cain."

Hulbert and Blodgett went plunging into the front door of the saloon, clattering for the stairs at the rear. Cain stood below, just under the edge of the awning, looking after them.

It was the suddenness of Latigo's next move that turned the trick. He no more than leaped through the window he had opened than he leaped back out. He was at the edge of the awning before Cain had thought to look up, and the next instant he hurled himself bodily down on the little man. One slashing blow with the gun he had taken from Tequila and Finis Cain slumped into his arms, unconscious.

Inside the saloon, upstairs and down, the frenzied search was going on. But nowhere was there sign of the cowboy who had continuously outwitted them. Big Fist and his boss came through to the open upstairs front window, looked out and called to Finis. When there was no answer the pair took the stairs three steps at a time on the way down, and did not slow down until they were back at the swinging doors.

"Look!" Big Fist Blodgett yelled as the light from the doors struck the buckboard out there with its cage. "It's Finis! Lyin' down in there! That damned jasper's got him locked in th' skunk-wagon!"

Hulbert took one look and forgot all discretion. "Come on!" he roared, striding out and grabbing up the ax from where it had fallen. "We'll chop this damned contraption to kindlin' wood, get Hoss an' Finis out, then burn it to hell!"

"Look out!" Hoss Stivers yelled from within the cage. "Th' hombre is hid behind th' buckboard, ready to burn yuh-all down!"

Hulbert and Blodgett stopped in their tracks. Latigo Carroll stood up from the shadow of a front wheel. A .45 was in each hand. They were his own guns this time, picked up from where Tequila had dropped them on the wooden walk.

"The show's over, gents," he announced. "Time for yuh-all to get in the skunk-wagon. Reach for the sky!"

Neither man obeyed. They leaped apart as if stung by hornets, and hands hit leather with a smart crack as each man went for both of his guns. Latigo fired, took Big Fist in the chest, the hellish smash of the bullet knocking him to his knees. But Blodgett got in a shot. It seared along the cowboy's cheek, laid it open like a knife. Latigo moved his gun in an arc to the left, thumbed the hammer, though dizziness was assailing him. His and Hulbert's shots overlapped. Latigo felt a sting in the fleshy part of his arm.

Hulbert's legs folded, and he slapped the ground with his face, shot through the breastbone. Then there was deathly silence and both fallen men lay still.

"Sorry," Latigo said shakily, steadying himself against the buckboard wheel. "I never rightly meant to haul no dead skunks in this here hack. I was aimin' to leave that part of it to the Peco law."

Saloon habitués and loungers from all over town lined the walk by the time the echoes of the shots had died away. But none offered interference with what they saw that gun-fast and hell-careless stranger doing. For Maguey Gulch had been bereft of its fighting men.

After brief attention to his bleeding cheek, Latigo brought the limp form of Tequila Joe from under the corner building where he had rolled it. This and the bodies of Hulbert and Blodgett he loaded into his touted skunk-wagon, locking the door firmly on them. At a curt order from Latigo, a meekly obedient onlooker went out and brought in the two dun horses, helped him to hitch them.

Latigo climbed up to the driver's seat, looked down upon the amazed congregation there. He grinned confidentially.

"This sure showed one thing, gents," he announced. "Two-legged skunks ain't noways as smart as four-legged ones. Show a four-legged skunk a trap an' he'll run a mile outta his way to go around it. But show a human skunk a trap an' he just can't keep away from it till it closes on him!"

Imparting that sage piece of philosophy, he cracked his whip and drove out of Maguey Gulch, with its dazed citizenry staring after him.

FIGHTIN' TALK

By S. OMAR BARKER

There's a dozen ways to tell a man
  Whose doin's ain't admired,
To up an' travel while he can,
  His presence ain't desired!

You can say he'd better "punch the breeze,"
  Or "amble," "dust," or "slope,"
Or "roll his tail," or "shake his knees,"
  Or "take it at a lope."

Some's more polite than others is,
  An' some is kinder cross—
You can tell a man to "chase his biz,"
  Or to "bear down on his hoss."

Now it ain't no cause for throwin' lead
  To tell a man to go.
It some depends on how it's said,
  As all good cowboys know.

You'll hear men told to "pull their freight,"
  Or "lean ahead an' shove,"
An' it ain't no cause for breedin' hate,
  Though 'course it ain't true love!

"High-tail it," "drag it," "light a shuck,"
  "Vamoose" an' "hit the trail,"
"You better make a wind to suck—"
  They all mean "hump your tail!"

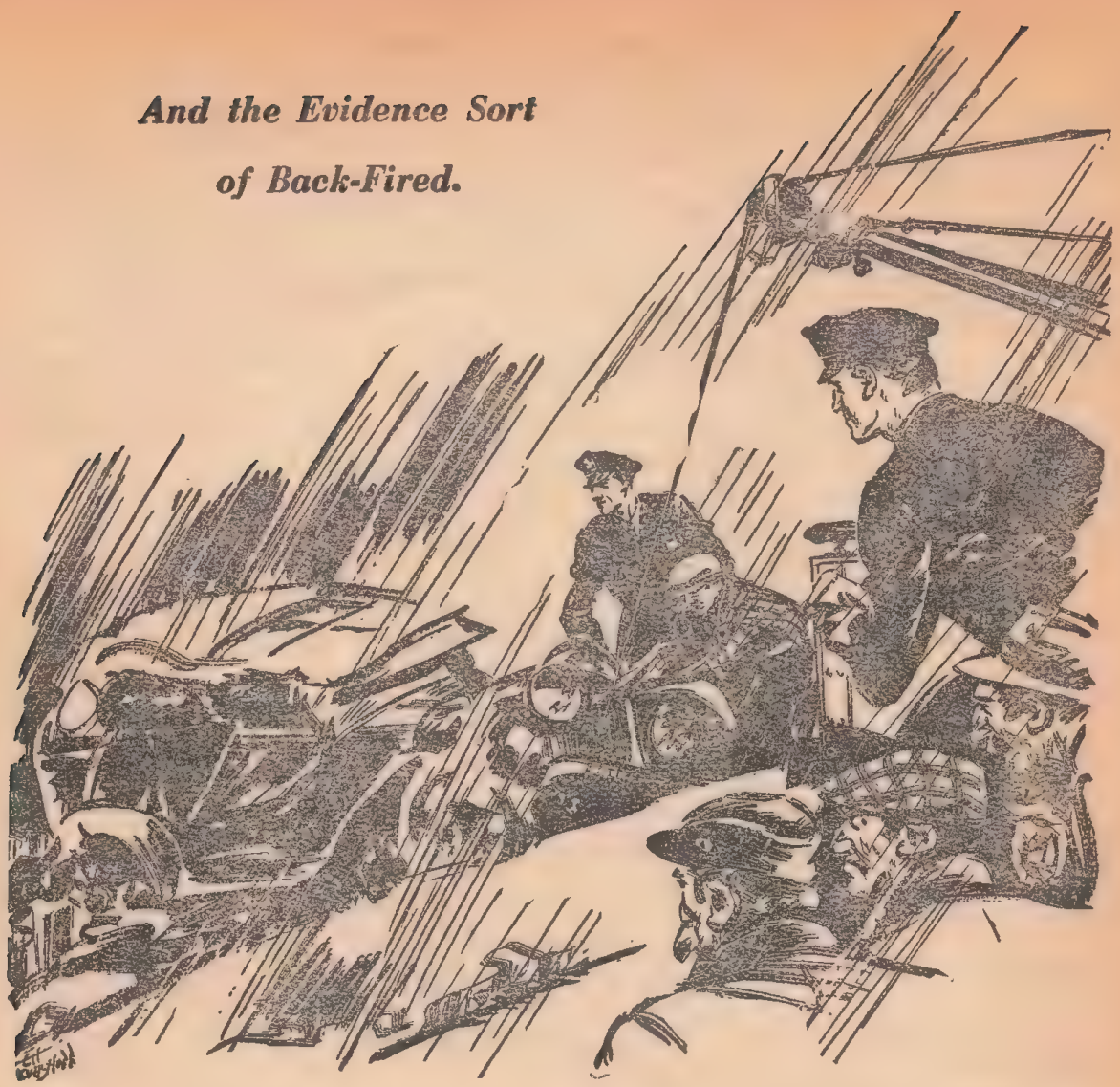
An' so does "brindle," "weave along,"
  An' "rattle up your hocks."
Another one that's kinder strong
  Is "dust your dirty socks!"

Now all of these is often spoke,
  Out where the west is wild,
As if you only aimed to joke,
  An' wasn't nohow riled.

But there *is* a little shorthorn word,
  Us cowboys sometimes need,
That's fightin' talk when it is heard
  Unless you choose to heed.

It ain't exactly cussin', though
  The lightnin's shore to hit
The feller that don't up an' go
  When a cowboy says to *"git!"*

And the Evidence Sort of Back-Fired.



SALVE FOR SULLIVAN'S CONSCIENCE

By T. O. DEMPSEY

"THIS must be the rain to end all rains!" the Sarge grumbled, shifting around in his seat like an elephant with the mange. A tough man on springs the Sarge was, a great help to the tire companies. He was working on his second ton, everybody forgetting to tell him about the Hollywood Habit.

It was as dark along the highway as a preacher's hell. A short, somewhere, had blown the lights. I was glad we had a good battery in our old sneaker-upper. A guy was following us; making enough decibels

with his horn to make an anti-noise committee throw up its hands. After a while the Sarge woke up his tongue, and laid his ham on my Mary-ann.

"Whoa, Napoleon!" he hollered in a voice like a sinking ferry-boat. "Some citizen wants to know why the lights are out. Interview him, Joe. Interview him. Tell him the power-house is gone to lunch. Be refined with him; he might be one of the blokes passes the salt to the mayor."

I allowed the prowl-car to mope, and the guy fire-engines alongside.

"Torrsmollup basiro!" he hollers as he comes broadside.

All I spy is a white face, and a thumb signal; then he is gone. He's got a big boat, and I see no good in paddling after him in our canoe.

The Sarge being better than me at blueprints, I turn to him.

"I thought Eskimos wouldn't live in this climate?" I ask. "Did you get the name of the station, Sarge? Sounded to me like the neighbor's radio, when some guy is broadcasting a fight."

The Sarge yawned. "You shoulda took up English in the third grade, Joe. The gent said, 'Terrible smash up back there!' God knows, the big signal was enough! Guess we've got to reverse the old tea-pot. Somebody told that bozo we get paid for things he don't. As the old top-soak used to say, 'Left about face,' Joe!"

We made waves on the turn; but the old tub refuses to be sunk. Back we go through the ink-bottle night.

Sure enough. Two miles back, some duck has gone into a tail-spin, and his canvas-topped crate has done a humpty-dumpty in the ditch. It was a case for the king's horses all right. The wreck was a WRECK.

"Get off your trapeze, and see if there is any of the driver left," the Sarge orders. That'd be the Sarge all right. Sit him in the wagon, and he thinks it's a three hour show with no intermissions.

I pulls my tarpaulin around me, and climbs out into the duck's delight. My flash showed no sign of the crew of the big Noah's Ark.

"Looks like the Samaritans have been here already, Sarge," I says. "Guess we'll find the missing pieces of this cross-word puzzle over with the men in white at Jamaica Hospital."

The Sarge makes the supreme sacrifice, and drags himself into the cloud-burst.

"Gotta be sure," he grumbles. "What's the license number, Joe? Be easier to take the plate off than write it down in this niagara. What's it say?"

"It's upside down, Sarge," I explain, after flashing my ever-ready on the disk.

"Stand on your head, and read it," the old whale snaps.

He made me mad; but I ignored the crack. "HG17932. New York plate," I tell him.

"Gosh!" he says. "That number sounds familiar. Sure! That's the last stolen car that came over the radio. Got some memory, ain't I?"

"An elephant never forgets," I cracks, quicker than Joe Louis' left upper-cut. I had to grin at my own brilliance. Then, suddenly, my grin died quicker than it did the day I found there was a new cook up at Fair Patterson's.

THE Sarge had turned his flash on, and was running it up and down the ditch. The light showed something that made him gasp like a guy with a mouthful of hot soup. I followed his beam. A shiver went up my spine when I saw what made him choke. A child's hand was sticking up out of the muddy stream — ten feet away from the wreck—a little fist, no bigger than my badge. It gave me a feeling like someone had poked me in the solar-plexus. I was so upset, I stumbled reaching for the tiny mitt, and near drowned myself.

"Take it easy, Joe," the Sarge recommended grimly. "The Olympic try-outs is over."

He did not wise-crack when I came to the surface with the little six-year-old. I saw at

once it was a girl. There was class to the little white face, too. I had her by the back of the head with one hand, and I felt a soft spot there that told me where she hit when she landed. She was as dead as a Fulton Market fish. If the skull fracture had not killed her, she had drowned anyway.

The Sarge and I carried her over to the prowl-car, and gave her a look-see in the head-lights. The Sarge had kids of his own, and I could see he was chawing hell out of his underlip. We'd dragged many a stiff from underneath wrecks on the highway—and some live ones that were better off dead—but this was something different.

Suddenly, the Sarge started, like a guy coming out of a trance.

"Say," he said, "this kid has pajamas on, Joe! What do you make of that?"

Sure enough! She was wearing them—stripes, fancy button-holes and all.

"Oh, well," I says, "everyone dresses their kids to suit the pocket book these days. You're likely to meet them in fig leaves if the budget never gets balanced again."

The Sarge grunted. He had taken the limp little thing from me, and was bending over it. "Who the hell 'd be riding a kid in pajamas around in a stolen car, a night like this? Whoever it was, musta been a fine skunk to beat it, an' leave her; unless someone picked them up cold, and failed to spot the baby."

His face was close to the kid's. Suddenly he sniffed. "Give a smell here, Joe."

I did not understand him at first, then I got wise to what he meant. He was sniffing at the kid's face. I bent over too.

"Smells like a hospital—ether, I guess," I suggested. "That explains the pajamas. Someone was taking the little girl home from the hospital."

"Ether, my eye!" the Sarge growls. "That's chloroform. You don't know much about hospitals, Joe, either. It's a great thing to be so dumb you don't even know when you're sick. Hospitals don't discharge patients in the middle of the night, Joe."

I passed up the crack. I was looking at him, and he was looking at me. We were both thinking the same thing. The Sarge spoke first.

"Someone balled-up a snatch," he said, and I nodded. With the kid in his arms, he ran for one door of the prowl-car. I ran for the other.

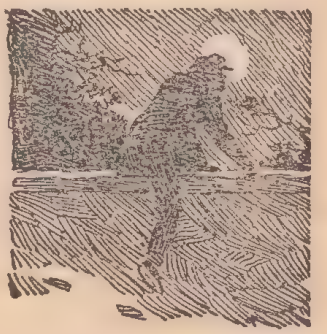
"You'd better step on it, Joe!" he said.

"You're telling me?" I responds; giving her the gun.

IT WAS a kidnapping all right. They had pictures of me and the Sarge on the front page of every paper in town, next morning. I looked like hell in my wet uniform. They had to leave most of the Sarge out, to leave room for the story. I heard his wife wise-crack, we looked like Mahomet and the mountain. The latter was true enough; but I was born here—I ain't no foreigner.

Well, when we pulled up to the precinct that night, things broke faster than the plagues in Egypt. The lieutenant on duty took one look at the dead kid, and started scratching his head like a guy in the first year of the seven years itch. Suddenly he grabbed a phone book.

"It's her, all right!" he muttered, and his face went as white as a laundryman's coat. "I've seen her picture many a time in the



papers. That's the Mulville kid—the ten million dollar baby. Gosh, I hate to break this!"

He meant, of course, the big millionaire that owned the estate near Queen's Village. I began to feel sorry for those rich people. They were going to be up against something that money couldn't mend.

"Chase over to the hospital," he ordered me and the Sarge, while he waited for the girl in the telephone exchange to rub the sleep out of her pretty eyes. "See if anyone out of that wreck is parked in a bed there. Use your spurs, boys! Hell will be opening to receive sinners tonight, or I'm a heathen Chinee!"

He was right the first three times. If hell is anything like that precinct was that night, it surely is like the preachers say it is.

All we could find recorded at the fracture store was a young couple that mistook a lamp post for a clothes rack, and hung themselves all over it—also an old guy that tried to shoo away a taxi with his umbrella. The internes were walking around, looking like they thought the pedestrians were staying home out of the rain for spite.

When we got back to the precinct—we weren't half an hour away—the place was lined up with cars like the Yankee Stadium when the team was playing home. The newspaper boys had landed, and the situation was out of hand. The Sarge wasn't stuck on the whole world knowing his weight, and tried to crash the door. I ain't no Adonis; but a dame on a galloping horse might think me handsome at that. Sometimes I get tired resisting temptation; so I tips off a cameraman who the heroes were. They used up a lot of flashlight powder before we hit the inside of the station house. I turned on the stoop, to give the newspaper men a real break, but the Sarge grabbed me.

"Come on, Clark Gable," he says. "The Commissioner is inside. I seen his car down the block."

That was a horse of another color. Much as I disliked to disappoint my public, I hurried after the Sarge.

THE dead kid was Mulville's daughter, sure enough. Any crook monkeying with that class of people is like a guy smoking a butt around a munitions dump. The whole lid was off. I had a foolish idea that I could grab some dry rags upstairs. I had as much chance of making that one flight of stairs as I had of taking the prowl car in one hop to Europe. The mob was in the back room with the body; but the lieutenant was still at the desk, answering phone calls—and were they coming in! The minute he got his good eye on me and the Sarge, he had a job for us.

"What did you do—run out of gas?" he asked, sarcastic. "I thought you were taking in a movie. Try and get a little steam up, once in a while. Go down to Gus's garage, and have him shoot a wrecking car down. You'll probably meet the homicide squad on their way back from there. Get the car up here, as quick as you can. Open your eyes when they move the wreck. Don't leave any of it behind. Scoot!"

We drifted back to the overturned bus, after giving Gus's night man the word.

"We seem to be coming into the busy season, Sarge," I suggests. "Looks like the overtime is going to be plenty."

"If it keeps raining for the next six days," the Sarge answered, in a gloomy voice, "I figure, it will be dry four days before we get our next good sleep."

He wasn't far wrong.

We sat in our sardine tin, and shooed the crowd away, while we waited for the wrecker. We also had the pleasure of watching three or four of the plainclothes boys from the clue department, swimming around. I didn't see what they expected to find; but they had my best wishes. I would have liked to get my hands on the guys that pulled that job. Gus's night man showed up in a little while. He shunted the wrecker up, and hooked a cable onto the overturned car. It was a neat job; and he had it flopped back in the road in a couple of minutes. Most of the top was ripped off, and the hood was a sight; but it seemed to have held together. When we were all set to blow, the Sarge and me gave a last look around. There was nothing left behind that looked like a clue. The headquarters men were only worrying about getting out of the rain. We gave our flashes a last swing round. I spotted a small monkey-wrench laying on the road—prob-

ably out of the car's tool-box—in a puddle of oil. I hated to pick it out of the grease, and was going to let it lay, when I spotted one of those circus advertisements that they nail on trees, lying in the centre of the highway. I used that to pick up the wrench, and threw the whole thing in our tool-box. The homicide boys were too wet to ask me what it was. Maybe they weren't looking my way.

We made a procession back to the precinct. The wreck got a greater reception than the king's carriage turning out of Buckingham palace. I never saw so many, and such wet newshounds. I kinda felt sorry for them, until I saw what they called my photo, in the early editions.

THE Sarge and me were hauled in front of the Commissioner right off the bat. He was in the dick's room. They had the dead kid there. The whole outfit was moping around there, and a gang from Mulville's. I spotted Mulville, holding his wife in his arms. They were top-notchers; but they were crying just like Mrs. O'Grady.

The Sarge took the rap for me and him. The Commissioner wanted an earful about the guy who gave us the tip-off.

"Did you get his number, Sergeant?" he asked. I could feel meself frying, the minute he opened his mouth. The rain would be no alibi for not getting the bird on paper. I gave the Sarge a sad eye; but he pulled a fast one. He read a number out of his book. I figured it was a phoney, and I put him at the bottom of the class for being a sap; but I was kidding myself. The old Sarge may look like an imported cheese; but whoever handed out the brains to him used a shovel. He had got the number, all right. It was just that I hadn't seen him jot it down. He was one of those guys whose gray matter worked without making a noise. He surely saved the day. I put him down for a new tie on his next birthday.

Our next job was to run a couple of dicks out to the guy's house to pick him up. He was a doctor; down Richmond Hill way. He was mad when he learned he had to come with us: seeing that he had just crawled back into the blankets, twenty minutes before we got there. He said he had not stopped when he saw the smash-up, because he had been called out on a hemorrhage case, and had to hurry for fear his patient would bleed to death. Besides, he said, there was a car stopped there already. He could not say what kind of a car, or did he get the license number; but it was standing with its headlights shining on the wreck. He said he saw a man who was built like a giant, over by the overturned car. He had the car tilted over, the Doc said, as though he were giving someone underneath a chance to crawl out. I knew there was no one man could tilt over that apple-cart; so I figured the old Doc was either pulling an alibi, or had taken a couple of shots of his own dope to help him carry on. Night work is tough on them old sawbones. Well, he wasn't going to be my headache, so I listened, and said nothing.

Well, in a case like this, concerning big shots, there had to be a goat. When a couple of days went by, and they couldn't pin anyone to the mat, the Department had to find an out. They dug up some guy who had crawled into a doctor's office, that night, in East 60th Street, New York, with a broken arm, and mud in his ears. The poor sap was from Brooklyn. Said he was crossing Third Avenue, Manhattan, when a hit and run taxi gave him the works. The only thing they had on him, was that he had given the sawbones a phoney address. They got him a couple of days after, when he came back to have his arm dressed. He explained the phoney address, by saying he was afraid the Doc would call his home, before he got there, and start his wife worrying. He said he had spent the evening visiting the New York gin-mills—getting in the right shape, evidently, for jousting taxi-cabs. I had a peek at him. He looked like a pretty decent lad—cabinet making was his racket. The papers worked up a fairytale about him. They described him as a hard-looking bird, with deep-sunken eyes. Well, I've seen a prisoner's eyes pop when he's first introduced to the

goldfish room in the stationhouse; but after the second squad of questioners goes off duty, the poor bum's eyes are usually bumping against his brain. In this guy's case, I figured it a frame from the start. The Sarge figured him guilty. The Sarge usually hits his nails on the head: my bones told me he was wrong for once.

OF COURSE they had to dig up more on the guy. They couldn't break him down—the guy being innocent. Inspector Dormer had charge. I knew him; been up before him on charges more than once. He was as hard as an ivory nut. He was the kind of a cop would send his own mother to the hot seat if he caught her looking out a window when a shooting was going on. When that bozo set out to prove things, he used rivets. The car had been hoisted in Brooklyn, not far from the prisoner's home. The Inspector dug up that. Then, there was the ladder—the kidnapper had used a ladder to get into the kid's bedroom. The Inspector got the wood experts to frame a ladder building job in the prisoner's cellar. They dug up a chloroform bottle; claimed they found it in the little girl's nursery. They got the family doctor of this Stanley Williams—that was the prisoner's name—to swear that he had missed the bottle one time Williams had been in complaining of a lame back. I could see they were all set to put the case against the poor sap on the ice. Well, someone has got to be the goat, in a big thing like that. Though the guy had no record, the Inspector made a bum out of him, by getting a baby-faced moll from Red Hook, to swear that he was spending plenty of his spare time and spare money on her. They wanted a gal who would admit that Williams intended to rush the kid over to her; but they could get no moll that dumb. Williams' wife was out, as far as framing that on her was concerned. She was a fine type; about twenty-five, and blonde. One look from her big innocent blue peepers, and any jury in the world would have turned her loose. She sure stuck to her meal-ticket like a good one. Of course she knew he was innocent. You could see the girl had too much brains to marry a crook. I felt like a rheumatic when I thought of what the poor woman was going through. The newspapers gave her a big hand. She deserved it. She slapped a mortgage on the house she had bought herself out of five years cooking for boarders, and hired the smartest mouthpiece in the Borough, for her old man's defense.

The funny thing was, I only lived a couple of blocks away from the Williams' shack. They were on Bedford Avenue, and I lived on Nostrand. I always liked Brooklyn—a very convenient place to drop dead; full of graveyards. The old egg juggler who grabbed my ten per week, for keeping my feed-bag filled, knew Mrs. Williams well. She told me, she felt bad about the poor gal. That surprised me, as I had always figured the only thing that ever worried that old she-eagle would be her own bankroll. She blatted so much about Mrs. Williams, I began to suspect it was only a song and dance for the benefit of the boarders. One day, to call her bluff, I asked her why she didn't invite the woman over.

She gave me the eye at that; and, after pulling a couple of hairs out of a forest on her chin, she said, "That's a good idea. She's only twenty-five, and she'll soon be a widow. You're nearly thirty—aren't you, Mr. Sullivan?"

She couldn't warm me up.

"Listen, ma'am," I said, "when I didn't fall in love with you, after eating your delicious cooking for all these years, what chance would she have?"

Just for that, the old weasel threw an extra slab of ham in with my hen-fruit. My mother always said I had a way with the women, and I'm not going to make a liar of my own favorite parent.

THREE or four days later, the old buzzard called me into the parlor, and who was decorating a chair, but Mrs. Williams. She was a swell-looker, but the worry in her face hurt me like a toothache. She slipped

me a sad smile, that made me feel worse. Of course the old pirate had to introduce me as the cop who found the dead kid. I thought that would finish me with the girl; but she was too fine a gal to feel sore. That piece of tact merely brought up a discussion of the case. The poor girl was sure that her old man had nothing to do with the job. She'd been his wife for five years, and she surely ought to have a good line on him. She said it was all a frame up. Being a cop, I shouldn't have agreed with her; but I did. It wasn't the wisest crack in the world to make; but I knew in my heart and soul no girl like her could ever have got mixed up with anything crooked. I thought of all the low-down I had heard about Inspector Dormer, and I knew she was right. Before she left, she had me burning like an oldfashioned lime-kiln—the kind that keeps going for a week. I promised her that if I found out anything screwy being pulled in the way of jacking up the evidence, I would give it to her, and she could pass it along to the lawyer. Of course I knew it meant my job, if the Inspector got wise. Well, life is like that.

"I feel that you are my friend, Mr. Sullivan," she said, when we parted, "and my husband's."

"Sure thing, girlie," I assured her. "Count me in on the Xmas list. I'd be tickled if I could do anything for you—and your husband."

I made it a point to keep her posted on anything that came my way. I wasn't doublecrossing the job; I was only being fair. I have a conscience that bruises easy, and I wouldn't be in on anything that wasn't according to Hoyle, especially when it concerned a fine girl like her. To tell the truth, I was falling for her. Married women was never my weakness. I'd seen too many guys getting hurt jumping through windows. This was my first experience, and it was the real pre-war brand. It would have been milk and honey for me, if her old man got the chair, and left me a clear road. I hope you'll believe me when I say I'm not built as lousy as that. The only rats in my family are the ones in the cellar. I worked hard, trying to dig something up to clear that guy. They were introducing Jersey justice into the trial, and it was being rushed. I had to sweat, if I wanted to help her husband.

I was waiting for the Sarge one night, outside of a lunch wagon. He was inside making life miserable for a slew of hamburgers. I had less appetite those days than a canary with ulcers in the stomach. I sat in the prowl wagon wearing my brain down to a hollow shell. Suddenly I thought of

the wrench I had picked up that night. It was not that it could help her—I mean, his—case. I got a scare when I thought of not having turned it in. It was too late now, of course. I jumped out, and opened up the tool-box. Sure enough, it was still there—with the dried out greasy circus ad. For curiosity, I straightened out the ad. When I read it, my heart missed so many beats I had to feel my pulse to make sure I was still alive. It said:

BAKER & CROMWELL'S CIRCUS
SIDESHOW
ALI ABALA

The Strongest Man In THE WORLD.
Come in. Only 10c.

I was figuring, of course, that this Turk with the muscles might be the answer to the Doc's story about the guy he seen lifting the wreck that night. The old Doc's strong man story had got the horse-laugh up to this. Nobody could trace him. They didn't try very hard, figuring that the strong man was the Doc's alibi out for not stopping.

WHEN the Sarge came back from his debauch, I said nothing. I was doing some fast figuring. If the circus guy had dropped this ad, the Doc was right. It was more than possible. However, if Inspector Dormer got hold of the strong man, he would make him swear that the man who crawled out from beneath the wreck was Williams, or scare him into a fade-out. The defense had to get to him first, or they were licked.

I played the three wise men, and sneaked the ad home. I gave it to Mrs. Williams.

"We know your husband is being framed, Mary," I said—we had got to Mary and Joe by this. "If your lawyer can get hold of this Ali Abala, it'll be a cinch. As soon as the D. A.'s case is all in, your lawyer can spring the strong boy on them. Of course he'll swear the man he helped from under the car was not Stanley Williams. That'll leave your husband on the ground floor, with nothing to do but walk right out in the street. The old Doc will back up the terrible Turk. I'd like to be left out of it; but if I have to, I'll waltz right up, with the ad in my hand, and to hell with Inspector Dormer and the job. Anyway, a man the size of this Ali Abala ought to be as good as two witnesses. I hope he speaks English."

The next minute was very pleasant and embarrassing. First thing I knew, she had both of her arms around my neck, and was kissing me to beat the band.

"You're a darling, Joe," she said. "I wish—" Then she must have thought of her old man sitting in a cell for something he had no hand in, and she calmed down.

"To be honest," I says, "and there are a few honest cops, Mary, I'm trying to help out for two reasons. The first is because I got one of them consciences with an alarm-clock attachment. The second reason is, that you are the kind of a girl that a man could jump off the Empire State Building for, and say it's a pleasure. Of course, you're married, unfortunately for me. To help you, I've got to do all I can for your husband. I know you love him, and it makes me happy to make you happy. In any case, my conscience wouldn't let me see an innocent man framed.

Women are a puzzle. She didn't seem tickled. When she spoke, she sounded kinda sore.

"Would you want a wife, Joe," she said, "who would run out on you if you were in trouble—no matter how she felt?"

That one was hard on the digestion, no matter how you chewed it.

IT TURNED out to be no cinch for the lawyer to trace the Baker and Cromwell Circus. Of course, he got them in the end; but the Ali Abala they had was a new man. The old one had gone into the wrestling game. When they found him, he was calling himself Armond Vinciennes—champion of France. His mother knew him as Patrick Joseph O'Keefe, and she lived in Tipperary, Ireland. The trial was down to its last day when he showed up. He stopped it, though. On account of him being out of the state, the lawyer had to cough up plenty to get him across the border, so he could pin a subpoena on the boy. Just the same, he was the right guy. He remembered the smash-up. The car had been stepping, he said in a letter, and it skidded off the road. He happened to be there because he was following up the circus—being a day behind on account of meeting in with cousins from Tipperary, and getting lit up. It appears all the Tipperary people are cousins, and they always get lit up when they meet. So he said, anyway—but I won't vouch for it—he said, he stopped the car he was driving, and got out in the rain, when he saw the accident. He heard groans coming from under the car, and he pulled his strong man act, and the guy crawled out. Sure, he would know the guy again! Didn't he take him all the way into New York!

The lawyers for the defense had just finished up with the last of his witnesses—the frame was fitting Stanley Williams pretty good—when Patrick Joseph O'Keefe walked down the aisle. I don't mind saying he was

some man. He weighed fifty pounds more than me, and I weigh two hundred. He had some build, too! A wood expert had just got off the stand, so the court needed waking up. Patrick Joseph O'Keefe surely did that little job to perfection. The defense lawyer was all smiles as he put the husky on the stand. The D. A. looked worried. He had a headache coming, I told myself, he could well look upset. The Irish giant told his story in a straightforward way anyone could believe.

"AND now, Mr. O'Keefe," says the smiling attorney, "take a good look at this defendant here, and tell me is he the man you helped from under the wrecked car?"

The big witness turned, and took a long look at Stanley Williams.

"Sure," he said, "that's the lad."

When I figured it out afterwards, I concluded it was a lot the lawyers's fault. He should have questioned the guy before he put him on the stand. Of course I admit I did the Inspector dirt. It was no frame-up. He had the guy who did the job all right.

For a long time I did not dare go near Mary Williams. About three months after they electrocuted her husband in Sing Sing, I got a letter from her. She said she had guessed all along that her husband was guilty —he admitted it to her before he died—but what could any woman do, but stick to her husband when he was in trouble. She wrote, she wanted to see me, to thank me for what I had tried to do. It was not my fault that we could not prove the guilty, innocent.

One thing I'm glad about. There are no Williams kids to be raised with mine. They might be, some day, blaming their stepfather for helping to send their old man to the hot seat.

THE MUSTANG

By FAY GIBSON (Aged 13)

THUNDERING across the prairie,
Their long mains flying in the wind,
They galloped past the trapper
With the fox he'd newly skinned.
They were led by a tall black mustang,
His eyes were gleaming and bright
As he led them forward and onward,
Till at last they were lost in the night.

* * *

He was known all over the district,
And further than that I may say,
But no one had tried to catch him
Or one of his herd any day,
It was said he was almost human
With his swiftness and cunning and skill,
But he was also known as a killer
And a killer who really would kill.

* * *

But one day while he was grazing,
A noose fell over his head,
And as he followed his captor
His eyes were vicious and red,
As soon as the saddle was on him
The man on his back as well,
He reared, and he kicked, and he bucked,
Till the man he slithered, and fell.

* * *

His black body reared on his hind hooves,
His forelegs pawing the air,
He fell on the prostrate figure
His right hoof shearing the hair,
Soon he was led from the corral,
And swiftly staked to the ground,
They tied him with leg-ropes, and halters,
Quite firmly as he soon found.

* * *

But he soon set his teeth into working,
And escaped just after the dawn,
So when cowboys arrived to shoot him,
They found that the mustang was gone.
A cowboy up on a hillock,
Saw the horses go galloping past,
And he knew their magnificent leader
Was the horse that escaped at last.

* * *

But when the twilight is falling
And the stars are twinkling on high
You can see the wild leader of horses
Silhouetted against the sky.

A Man Takes His Chances and Gets Away with It, Or Doesn't, When He Goes——

IN HARM'S WAY

by

ROY CHURCHILL

Author of "According to Plan," "On the Money Watch," etc.

ASA HOWE—Ace to his team mates on the U.S.S. *Tulsa's* track team, and Ace to his ship-mates on Number Six gun—stood swaying easily on the balls of his feet as the big cruiser at full speed rolled comfortably to the long Pacific swells. A flying fish shot out of the blue hollow off the bow and dipped in again. The sky was bright, the sun warm. They were getting south.

Down the white decks the ship's company was lined up for inspection. Long rows of tanned young men, vigorously alive, each of their hard bodies trained to some particular man-o-war's task.

Asa Howe stood in a coxswain's position back of his company. He was as tall as Kip Skees, on the left in the first rank, and as broad in the shoulder. He and Kip pulled opposite thwarts in the *Tulsa's* race boat.

The Exec was making his pre-maneuver speech, stressing watchfulness and care, hammering on it, his full throated seaman's voice carrying clearly about the silent decks above the hum of the *Tulsa's* engines and the swish of water along the sides. Every year the drill took a toll of lives. Who would it be this time? What ship? What division? What man? The Exec wound it up and brought it home. He hoped it would not be the *Tulsa,* or any of the *Tulsa's* crew this year.

"I want every one of you men to remem-

ber that we will be in danger every day. You know the nomenclature of accidents. Be on the lookout for negligence, faulty gear, misunderstood orders. Don't forget what John Paul Jones said: 'In command of a ship that sails fast, I intend to go in harm's way.' That's where we will be. In harm's way. Don't forget it. That's all. Sound retreat, bugler."

Asa Howe was at a loss to understand the nervousness that beset him. The Exec was right of course, but carefulness and planning did not seem always to matter. There was luck. Death had a haphazard way of striking. There was the time the yeoman forgot to fill in a middle initial in Johnny Cahill's transfer, so that Johnny missed being aboard a certain ill fated submarine; the night Heinie Roseblum slept in the brig out of his regular billet on the old *Tennessee,* and escaped being cooked with steam from a broken line. No rhyme or reason at all in that.

Asa Howe wished the Exec hadn't brought it up.

"What do you think?" he asked Frenchy Pequot as the inspection was dismissed.

Frenchy shrugged. "A man gets due. Who knows? My old man says it's a bad sign to think about it." Frenchy's old man had lost an arm at Verdun. "Figure it's the other guy that gets it, he says. Then you don't worry."

Asa did worry though. Why should it always be some other ship and some other man? The *Tulsa* was new. She had the latest safety devices, she was plastered with E's. He even had one himself, on the sleeve of his blouse, for high scores on Six gun. He looked down at it. E's didn't make man or ship immune. His was exactly like the ones on two of the men he had ferried to the *Mercy* from a gun explosion last summer. E's didn't work without luck.

THE *Tulsa* reached the rendezvous. Ships of her own class joined her, went away on mysterious errands. Asa Howe helped take guns to a sandy island and hide them on their carriages among the dunes. They set up a radio station, put the leathernecks ashore to listen and watch the sky for enemy planes. There were no mishaps while they did this with almost reckless speed.

Lieutenant Leonard Thomes was in charge. He was a small bug-eyed man, assistant navigator, and gunnery officer. The deck called him "Look-Twice." Everything had to check to a hair. Nothing went wrong when he was in charge. He had it in for all the athletic bunch; faultfinding, heckling, seeing nothing worth while in speed and snap.

Asa did not want to get like the lieutenant. He was the one officer, among all the rest, out of whose way Asa kept himself.

"If that's what it takes, count me out," Asa complained to Dutch Gottehardt, the boatswain's mate.

"You got the guns ashore," Dutch said, "three minutes slower than the same detail did on the coast last year, and nobody bruised a finger. What you got against Look-Twice?"

"He's on my tail particular. You know his line: 'Put an extra turn on that cleat, coxswain. Bear off a little. Less speed there. We'll check that.' It gets a gang all upset!"

"A lot of young fellows get along all right in this outfit until they get the idea some officer is after them," Dutch admonished. "Don't get to imagining things. Gold stripers always win out on you. Besides that, they get transferred."

"I'd like to get him in a jam before that," Asa said. "He's always pointing right at me." Asa's resentment was a tangible force.

"Forget about it! I admit the guy is mean, but you don't see me giving a paymaster's sock if he is."

"He's after me, not you," Asa said.

"Yeah? And last summer on the coast, another officer dropped a gun right through the launch, on the same detail. Broke a man's leg. Suppose it had been you? Look-Twice has got his good points."

There it was again, Asa Howe thought, thrown right in his lap, the same old stuff, summed up in the boatswain mate's words: "Suppose it had been you?"

"Here comes a messenger." Dutch nodded down the deck. "Stick by a minute. Not after me, you say? Look-Twice plays no favorites. It'll be something that bird is remembering that the boatswain's mate forgot. The further you get along in this man's navy, the tougher it gets. What is it, sonny?"

"Coxswain Howe will report to the officer of the deck, Mr. Thomes," the messenger said.

Asa Howe gritted his teeth as he followed the messenger, but he grinned back at Dutch Gottehardt. "What did I tell you?" he said resignedly, straightened his neckerchief and put his hat on an even keel. He'd take a tip from Dutch and watch his step.

Lieutenant Thomes was waiting. Asa Howe brought his long body to rigid attention, and looked straight aft to where the flag flapped and curled like a picture postcard. He knew without being told that his polished paymaster shoes were exactly three inches apart and that they toed a mark, that his hand salute was at the proper angle, and his white working clothes fresh and clean. He knew also with satisfaction that his eyes were levelled off fully a foot over the lieutenant's head.

"You sent for me, sir," Asa said.

Through his thick lenses the lieutenant's pop eyes glared resentfully. "Look at me then. Stand at ease."

"Aye aye, sir."

"I've been watching your work lately. I've been picked for a ticklish job. You will go with me. Store a week's provisions in your launch, extra fuel, water. The engineer force is going over the motor. There will be spare parts for it. Have your crew ready for inspection at eight P.M. I will check each item over with you before then."

"Aye aye, sir."

"That will be all."

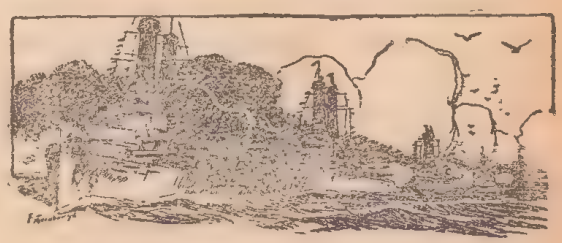
Asa Howe asked no questions. An officer usually took his second in command into his confidence, gave some outline of what was to be done. Look-Twice never did that, and Asa did not expect it. This probably was some sort of cutting-out expedition. But what Asa Howe could not fathom was why Lieutenant Thomes had been chosen to head the detail. Anyone else would have been better—unless it was extremely bad and had only a thousand-to-one chance of succeeding; then it would be Look-Twice, of course. Look-Twice, the cautious checker and hair-splitting detail fixer.

ASA went to Dutch again. "The Exec spilled it to me," Dutch explained. "Some of 'em sat up all night in the Admiral's office figuring it out. They're picking Look-Twice because he can navigate. Never misses by a pencil point, that boy. What you can't figure is why he picks Ace Howe to take along?"

"He says he's been watching me."

"I have, too," Dutch said. "In some ways you and Look-Twice act alike, this trip. You're geting cautious, like he is. What's on your mind? First thing I know you'll be going down ladders to mess, one step at a time instead of three. I saw you wait for your boat two rolls before you jumped off the boom. You didn't use to do that."

The subject brought back the Exec's speech, the almost sure knowledge that some ship, some man, would get the last call during these maneuvers. Who would it be?



"What're we going to do?" Ace asked quickly.

"The lieutenant will never break down and tell you the plans," Dutch said, "so I might as well give you the dope. It's a crazy idea. The Admiral figures that the navy

has gone away off in the technical end. Air fleet, radio, remote firing, all that stuff. He figures the enemy Black Fleet along that line, knowing its admiral from Annapolis on. Our old boy is going primitive on him. Dopes it that the other admiral won't be looking for what he pulls; that iron men and wooden ships, come back to life, will fool him."

"And they pick Pop-Eye Thomes!"

"They pick Look-Twice and you. Look-Twice to get them there and you to do the dirty work. You've got to be in a certain square yard of ocean at not over two seconds before or after the right time, and it's got to be all in the dark. Nobody but Look-Twice Thomes could figure it out."

"I don't know why yet."

Dutch Gottehardt lowered his voice. "Come over here. There's a mess attendant and the captain of the head with their big ears cocked. Let 'em get a load of this and they'll spread it like a smoke screen. If this leaked out, old Dutch would get thrown in the brig. It's like this—*nothing can be done nowadays without the air.* The air means aviation gas, and that means somebody to carry that gas. Their tank ship. All you and Look-Twice have to do is to waylay her on the way to the Black base and blow her up, theoretically. Plant a mine, or something, maybe."

"She'll have a destroyer guard, two or three hawks zigzagging the course. We couldn't get in sight of her."

"Our Strategy Board went into all that, and they give you a chance to succeed. Besides, what's a launch crew, and you and Look-Twice, to winning a battle? They throw you in like a white chip, hoping for a miracle."

"It'll be that, getting a launch to sea, and back again, stopping to sink a tanker," Asa Howe said. "My boat will stand as much as any of them, but—things can happen."

"You'll have Look-Twice along. He's been lucky. Let that comfort you." Dutch chuckled consolingly. "And lemme know how it comes out, if you make it. Nobody killed so far. It's been a disappointment to the newspapers."

THE *Tulsa* launch did not put out to sea, but followed the coast for a dozen miles and put in at a sleepy village, grouped about a small bay. A sixty foot schooner lay at anchor there, her decks cluttered with pens for carrying the barnyard stock that native families took with them on every voyage, to live on and to barter with. The decks had been cleaned, and inside the pens under tarpaulins were two capable field guns, in charge of ten of the *Tulsa's* marines.

Lieutenant Thomes made no explanation. The launch crew transferred their stores to the schooner, and under his orders began to make sail. Asa Howe knew now what Look-Twice had meant about watching him. Asa knew how to make sail, and handle a schooner; and unbelievably, he had to admit, Look-Twice did too. They put to sea at dark, out the harbor entrance, the launch engineer busy with the schooner's heavy duty auxiliary engine.

Outside, a fresh breeze filled the patched sails—patched, Asa saw, with wide strips of good navy canvas. Somebody had been busy on this stunt for more than a day. He suspected Lieutenant Look-Twice Thomes, now straddling his short legs and getting an angle on a star with his sextant. Asa held the watch.

"Clear night," Look-Twice said. "Better for us than overcast."

"Yes, sir," Asa said. He longed to ask for details, and would have with any other officer, but not with this one.

"Time," the lieutenant said, and took the stop watch, checking it, and the sextant angle, on a pad. "We'll take another," he said, "just to be sure."

"Yes, sir." The two words were packed with sarcasm. More, perhaps, than Asa intended. A great deal more than any lieutenant could ignore.

"We have a job to do," Lieutenant Thomes said stiffly. "After that I am putting you on the report for impertinence. We

are to intercept a tank ship, and, in theory, to sink her. How much of the plan do you already know?"

"What I can guess," Asa Howe said stubbornly.

It was anything but a bright prospect. However this adventure came out, he would be lucky to keep his temper and avoid a court martial.

"You will do exactly as you are told, and nothing more. There are old clothes in a locker below. Put them on. You will steer when we sight our quarry. I will remain hidden with the other men until the time comes, directing the course from the hatchway. Our vessel must have nothing suspicious about it. Can I depend on you?"

"I obey orders, sir," Asa said.

"But you have no faith in this?"

"No, sir."

Lieutenant Thomes seemed not to hear. He went to the running lights, starboard and port, and had the green light replaced because it seemed a little dim. He went over the simple gear, piece by piece.

Asa Howe began to wonder. Beginning the trip with small faith, he had to give Look-Twice credit for attention to detail. The tanker they were after had to seek out the theater of this imaginary war, and there was only the narrow strait between certain islands that led to her base. She would have to come. In broad daylight, with an air escort as well as destroyers, would be the most logical way. Yet, if she too, were using strategy and making the run at night, and there had been a leak or a good guess by Look-Twice and the Admiral, then they were positive of a chance.

Lieutenant Thomes seemed so sure. Asa wished he had his own division officer. Then they could talk about it. He could really help, and he wouldn't be skirting as he was, the hard rocks of court martial.

It was a bright night, half of a late moon high in the arch of a star filled sky. Surely not the kind of a night to make a seaman worry about physical disaster, but Asa Howe felt uneasy. The fleets had been lucky. Suppose out of this innocence they ran straight into snake-eyes on the dice.

WITH Lieutenant Thomes moving restlessly about the small deck, figuring position constantly, checking this and that over and over, it was easy to imagine that a dangerous enemy would spring unannounced out of the mild and innocent night. Asa's uneasiness increased. He found himself wondering about the blank ammunition for the field guns, and speculating on what a few rounds of high explosive projectiles would do to the tanker if there happened to be some in one of the cases. It was absurd, of course, but the feeling grew until he moved over to them, threw back the tarpaulin and opened a cover. Lieutenant Thomes caught him at it.

"I was coming to that," he said to Asa. "One can't be too careful. We have far too much fuel. The available containers were too large."

"They help hide the guns," Asa said, already ashamed of himself. "I was checking the blanks. Not even a handful of gravel in any of them. One of the drums shifted. I was securing it. We're rolling a little."

But Asa knew that Look-Twice thought he had gone over the entire deck load. There had been a smell of leaking distillate. He would not tell him. Let him find out for himself, if there was anything. Any extra precaution suddenly seemed foolish. Was he becoming as childishly cautious as Look-Twice?

The lieutenant was not satisfied. "I will check back with you," he said, as if he resented Asa's sarcastic reference to the gravel, and as a matter of temperament he must continue a routine.

One of the lookouts interrupted. "Light on the port bow," he announced. Lieutenant Thomes hurried forward and trained his glasses. Asa threw the tarpaulin back over the full drums and blank ammunition.

It was an hour before dawn. The light was the masthead light of the tanker they were expecting. The schooner's course was

taking her directly into the path of the larger vessel. Asa grudgingly gave Look-Twice credit. He had figured it out to the yard. The tanker's red and green running lights blinked up above the horizon. She was making good speed. The men on the schooner ran to their hiding places. All thought of any more checking was forgotten.

A DESTROYER, one of the tanker's guards, came thundering down on them. No one was in sight on the deck of the schooner but Asa. The old schooner, steady at four knots, kept on her course, and slapped and beat at the wash made by the slim gray wasp as it circled about her. A hail came, "Heave to!"

Asa brought the schooner up into the wind, her patched sails slapped, and the slack gear rattled and banged. The booms creaked, and threatened to shift to the other tack. Asa did not quite let them. He did his part like an actor. He was dumb. He did not savvy. *"Veda,* San Tremente," he kept repeating the schooner's name and supposed destination. He managed a capable accent. To questions about registry and flag he gave his own name, "Antonio Saldino. *Veda.* San Tremente."

There was a growing thrill in it. The tanker was coming closer. There was another destroyer guard on her flank. She was even now in long range.

Asa knew that Lieutenant Look-Twice Thomes was in the hatchway, calculating the range. If the tanker changed course or grew suspicious, he would give the order to open fire at once; but he would crouch there for another mile, two miles, if he could. Look-Twice's pop eyes would be as somber as ever. His hands would not tremble. He would wait unmoved until the exact second.

The destroyer circled again, came closer. Asa felt his heart pound. He could make out figures on the destroyer's deck. There was a group on the bridge at the machine-guns. The covers were off the fore and aft guns. This bird was taking no chances. When they did start it would be quick.

"Stand by!" he heard Look-Twice warn.

"What's under that tarpaulin? Throw it back!" came an order from the destroyer.

Asa called a name, glad to get another man in sight, logically, on their deck, where he could help with the next move. Heinie Roseblum, bowlegged and funny in misfit clothing, came out of the hatch and moved aft. He pulled back a tarpaulin over a pen full of chickens. The chickens set up frightened cries. Somebody on the destroyer laughed, and was sharply reprimanded.

"Left," Look-Twice said softly from the hatchway. Asa knew that it was only a matter of seconds now. With Heinie to help they could tack either way, and the lieutenant was maneuvering the sails to screen the schooner's after deck from the watchers on the destroyer.

Asa let the schooner's head fall off to the breeze. Heinie pushed the booms over to help. The sails filled and the schooner gathered way, her guns hidden from the destroyer. The unsuspecting tanker was within easy range.

"Now!" Look-Twice said, still not loudly.

Instantly the waiting gun crews swarmed about the guns. Covers were snatched off, breech blocks clicked.

"Battle range. Commence firing!" The lieutenant's voice was louder now. There wasn't much need for caution when a thousand-to-one chance had won out.

Then came a full minute of unbelievable tumult. The tanker was a bare mile away, a huge unmissable target. There were shouts, deafening, blinding flashes. Actually, the guns fired ten shots, an average of five each. Enough and to spare before Asa

felt the blasts of fire and hot gas from the destroyer's guns as she closed in, the insistent tapping of machine-guns from her bridge.

"Riddled!" he said to himself, and remembered foolishly that some pacifist speaker said the navy did this blank cartridge practice so that men would go to real slaughter without fear.

"We sunk her!" Asa was shouting to somebody, and Look-Twice was blowing a whistle, shouting himself, "Cease firing! Secure!" Look-Twice with his glasses gone, his face humanly filled with excitement, helping Asa with a jammed halyard.

"Eight hits at least. Right at the water line, before they could open against us. We've done it! I must say you did your part—"

Asa heard the last word flying across a steeply tilted deck. Something had crashed the schooner. She was turning over. He dodged loose gear, scraped over a boom. Foaming black water reached up for him.

"Destroyer—rammed us," Look-Twice said, always definite.

Then Asa was swimming clear, looking for others less fortunate. Bad luck! That old hazard. Right on the eve of finishing. They had gone in harm's way.

A body struck his, and he dived for it, brought it up alongside him. "Is it you, Heinie? Hurt?"

"I'm all right," a voice choked. "Let go."

It was Look-Twice, not Heinie.

"Shout to the men to swim away from the wreck," Look-Twice gasped. "Gas and oil all around her and over her. I've got a throatful. One of our own gun muzzles went through the large, full drum."

ASA shouted. The lieutenant did feel queer. His face and hair were plastered with a sticky mess. And now there was flickering light. The schooner had caught fire. She lay on her side, half cut in two, dribbles of flame dripping down into the water, to spread and burn there on the surface. The destroyer had backed away, and had her searchlights trained. Boats were coming from her. Asa saw one stop and haul a man from the water.

"I hope it didn't catch any of them," Look-Twice said. "Fourteen, besides us."

He was speaking better, and Asa was thankful that the Lieutenant could swim as well as he. "We'd better get further away, sir," he said. "The stuff is moving this way. We'd get roasted. The boats are working on the wreck."

"I should have checked the spare fuel, got it out of the way," Look-Twice was saying. "I remember starting on it. The destroyer rammed right into it."

"No place to put it but on deck," Asa replied. "Things just happen like this."

"Perhaps I brought too much fuel. I wanted to be sure of having enough." Look-Twice began swimming toward the blazing vessel.

"You can't do that!" Asa argued. "You've got the stuff all over you!" He was following after.

"You've got more than I have. Some of the men might be in it, not able to get away. It's all my fault. With a little more care——"

They were close enough to feel the burning oil and distillate on their faces. Patches were in the water. A blazing ribbon shot down a wave hollow and thrust a red rapier between them. Asa broke its point with sprays of water from his open palm.

"We'd better get back away from this," Look-Twice decided. "If the fire caught us, we'd be two more rather than two less."

"Yes, sir," Asa said, but he did not begin to swim away. Something that was not a wet sail clung to one of the prone masts. Fire reached for this bundle, and then fell back as the spar churned the water. An arm in old clothes slapped at persistent flashes.

"Heinie Roseblum!" Asa cried. "I can dive half-way, then come up and slap the stuff aside and get a breath maybe, and make it. He's crippled, or something."

"The two of us can do it," Look-Twice said. "We'll go together. Come up fast and

beat the water, still holding our breath. As we come down, take a breath. One of us will miss the patches."

"Wait," Asa said. "I've kicked off my shoes, but I've still got my socks. We'll hold 'em over our mouths when we take the breath."

Look-Twice laughed hoarsely. *"Caution,"* he said. "I felt sure you had it."

They filled their lungs and dived. They plunged up at the half-way mark, near a blanket of fire, scattered it, breathed back some air, and smoke and gas that burned their throats, even through the wet webbing of Asa's socks, and got to Heinie's perch. They tore loose a section of the sail and covered their heads with it and swam back, Heinie between them. The sail caught fire, and they slapped the fire out with their hands.

A boat from the destroyer hauled them aboard before they cleared all the fire. The area of blazing surface had spread, and the destroyer's boat crew beat a path with their oars through the patches to them.

"Three more," Asa heard somebody say. "That makes sixteen."

"You mean all the men are rescued?" Look-Twice said through oil-smeared, blistered lips.

"Sixteen with you three, sir."

"That's all, then. But I'll check it, to be sure," Look-Twice said.

AND check it he did before he would go to the destroyer's sick bay for treatment for his burns. Heinie Roseblum had a broken leg. Some of the others were bruised and burned, Lieutenant Look-Twice Thomes the worst, and after him Asa Howe.

"Now you know the answer to what was worrying you?" Dutch Gottehardt said to Asa. "The maneuvers are over, and nobody killed this time. The old *Tulsa* took this rap and liked it. They're giving Look-Twice a couple of hundred credits. He practically won this fake war with a spigotty schooner. Half the admirals in the world are having jitters. All you lost was some guns and skin. He's even got you down for a medal for saving Heinie."

"He ought to have it himself."

"Feel different towards him, don't you, Ace? You remember that speech the Exec made about getting in harm's way, like John Paul Jones? You went and took Johnnie serious."

Asa grinned up at Dutch. Dutch was right. But it made no difference. A man took his chances and got away with it, or he didn't, when he went in harm's way. He had found that out for good.

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